

# **SPINAL IRRITATION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649260096

Spinal irritation by William A. Hammond

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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**WILLIAM A. HAMMOND**

**SPINAL  
IRRITATION**



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## SPINAL IRRITATION.

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### HISTORY.

It has been questioned by several distinguished authors whether such an affection as spinal irritation really exists as a distinct disease. Thus Valleix<sup>1</sup> ascribes the most important of its manifestations to hysteria, and regards the spinal tenderness present as being due to simple intercostal neuralgia; Inman<sup>2</sup> considers the pain produced by pressure over the spinous processes of the vertebræ as existing in the muscular attachments, and as indicative of what he calls myalgia. Mr. Skey<sup>3</sup> evidently looks upon all cases of spinal irritation as hysterical in their character, and Niemeyer<sup>4</sup> speaks incredulously on the subject, without giving

<sup>1</sup> *Traité des névralgies ou affections douloureuses des nerfs.* Paris, 1841, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> *On Myalgia: its Nature, Causes, and Treatment, etc.* Second edition, London, 1860, p. 225, *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> *Hysteria, etc.,* New York, 1867, p. 72, *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> *A Text-Book of Practical Medicine.* American edition, New York, 1869, vol. ii., p. 258.

any very decided opinion. It would be easy to bring forward other authorities who have expressed similar views, and I may have to allude to some of them more fully hereafter.

My own opinion is, that there is a well-defined disease of the spinal cord, which, if designated by its pathology, may properly be called spinal irritation, but which, in a system of nomenclature based upon morbid anatomy, would preferably be named spinal anæmia. In the recently-published nomenclature of the Royal College of Physicians,<sup>1</sup> the affection has no place unless it be included under the head of hysteria.

The first author who distinctly grouped together the symptoms of spinal irritation was J. Frank,<sup>2</sup> who, under the name of rachialgia, described the disorder with considerable accuracy, and laid the principal stress upon the local pain. He was followed by Stiebel,<sup>3</sup> who, however, contributed little to our knowledge of the subject.

Mr. J. R. Player<sup>4</sup> was among the first English physicians, if not the very first, to call attention to the fact that eccentric derangement of function may be the result of irritation of the spinal cord. Thus he says: "Most medical practitioners who have attended to the subject of spinal disease must have observed that its symptoms frequently resemble various and dissimilar maladies, and that commonly the function of every organ is impaired whose nerves originate near

<sup>1</sup> The Nomenclature of Diseases drawn up by a Joint Committee appointed by the Royal College of Physicians of London. London, 1869.

<sup>2</sup> De Rachialgiæ in Prax. Med. Univ., P. II., t. i., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Über Neuralgia Rachitica, Rust's Magazine, t. i., c. xvi., p. 549.

<sup>4</sup> Quarterly Journal of Science, vol. xii., p. 428. Quoted by Teale.

the seat of disorder. The occurrence of pain in *distant parts* forcibly attracted my attention, and induced frequent examination of the spinal column; and, after some years' attention, I considered myself enabled to state that, in a great number of diseases, morbid symptoms may be discovered about the origins of the nerves which proceed to the affected parts, or of those spinal branches which unite them; and that, if the spine be examined, more or less pain will commonly be felt by the patient on the application of pressure about or between those vertebræ from which such nerves emerge."

The term "spinal irritation" appears to have been first used by Dr. C. Brown,<sup>1</sup> of Glasgow, who, in a very excellent paper, gives a picture of the disorder which cannot fail to be recognized as truthful and exact by those who have witnessed several cases of the affection. He insists upon not confounding the complaint with those organic diseases of the vertebræ and spinal cord which some of its symptoms cause it to resemble, points out the variation of the phenomena according to the seat of the spinal tenderness, and inculcates the employment of rest and counter-irritation as the most effectual remedies. His ideas of the pathology of the disease are: "That the immediate cause of the pain of the back and breast is spasm of one or other of the muscles arranged along the spine altering the position of the vertebræ, or otherwise compressing them as they issue from the spinal marrow.

"That this spasm in many instances is strictly a *local* disease, produced by fatigue, wrong posture, or

<sup>1</sup> On Irritation of the Spinal Nerves. Glasgow Medical Journal, No. II., May, 1828.

other causes, and quite unconnected with the state of the brain, spinal marrow, or nervous system in general.

“ But that, in other formidable instances, this partial, spasmodic, or wrong action of the muscles is owing to a faulty state, perhaps an enlargement, of the vessels of the brain or spinal marrow. This state of the brain, as in many other diseases, gives rise to spasm or even to convulsion of certain muscles; which partial symptom from its severity attracts the chief attention. This local affection is confined to those portions of the spine where there is the greatest motion, and where, of course, the muscles having the greatest activity are most liable to deranged action or spasm. I imagine that this view of the subject is illustrated and perhaps confirmed by various symptoms which were observed in the different cases, and which without it were very incomprehensible. The partial palsy, the affection of the sight, the giddiness of the head (for I find that this was a prominent symptom in several cases, especially in that of A. S.), all give some confirmation to the notion that the brain is affected in these severe cases.”

Dr. Darwall,<sup>1</sup> of Birmingham, describes several features of the affection with accuracy, such as those simulating cardiac and gastric diseases. He is inclined to believe that the morbid condition of the spinal cord depends mainly upon irregularity of the circulation, generally congestion.

But no essay upon the subject of spinal irritation, which had yet appeared, was equal in thoroughness to

<sup>1</sup> On some Forms of Cerebral and Spinal Irritation. Midland Medical Reporter, May, 1829.



that of Mr. Teale,<sup>1</sup> and it is to him that the views now generally held relative to the connection between various eccentric phenomena, such as pain, spasm, and visceral disturbance, and a peculiar condition of the spinal cord, are to be attributed. He, however, committed the great error of regarding the affection as being due to inflammation, and, in what for those days was logical accordance with this theory, he combated it with strong antiphlogistic measures. His book may be studied with advantage, as presenting an admirable account of the many diverse phases which spinal irritation may assume.

Mr. Tate,<sup>2</sup> in his work on hysteria, attributes many of the protean manifestations of this disorder to spinal irritation, limited, however, to the dorsal region. He fails to recognize it as an independent disease. His treatment consists in the application of tartar-emeti- c ointment along the whole length of the dorsal vertebrae, and strong purgation. He discountenances the use of leeches and blisters.

Mr. W. R. Whatton<sup>3</sup> insists chiefly upon the liability to mistake spinal irritation for disease of the vertebrae. He gives a very excellent account of the symptoms. The treatment he recommends consists in the abstraction of blood, by leeches or cups, from the parts where the tenderness is felt, repeated every three or four days, and the application of small blisters on each side of the painful spots. Any debility ensuing in consequence of this treatment is to be remedied by the preparations of iron and quinine.

<sup>1</sup> A Treatise on Neuralgic Diseases dependent upon Irritation of the Spinal Marrow and Ganglia of the Sympathetic Nerve. London, 1829.

<sup>2</sup> A Treatise on Hysteria. London, 1830.

<sup>3</sup> On Spinal and Spino-Ganglial Irritation. North of England Medical and Surgical Journal, No. III., 1831.

In a clinical lecture delivered in Dublin, Dr. Corrigan<sup>1</sup> relates the particulars of several cases of spinal irritation, successfully treated by local antiphlogistic measures, and the internal use of iron. He does not, however, add any thing of importance to our previous knowledge of the subject.

Dr. Isaac Parish,<sup>2</sup> of Philadelphia, appears to have been the first American author who called attention to the affection in question. He relates the details of several cases, recommends the use of counter-irritants, especially tartar-emetic ointment, and concludes :

“First, that tenderness on pressure in some portion of the spinal cord is an attendant on many chronic neuralgic affections, and that, by relieving it in the manner proposed, these complaints are either entirely eradicated or temporarily suspended.

“And secondly, that the precise indications which this circumstance affords are not sufficiently understood at the present time to justify the establishment of any definite pathological principles applicable to the whole class of neuroses.”

Dr. W. Griffin and his brother, Mr. D. Griffin,<sup>3</sup> of Limerick, were the next to write upon the subject. The joint work of these gentlemen is based upon one hundred and forty-eight cases, all of which are thoroughly analyzed, and from which very definite deductions of pathology and treatment are drawn. The es-

<sup>1</sup> *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, July, 1831, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Remarks on Spinal Irritation as connected with Nervous Diseases : with Cases.* *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. x., 1832, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> *Observations on the Functional Affections of the Spinal Cord and Ganglionic Nerves, in which their Identity with Sympathetic, Nervous, and Simulated Diseases is illustrated.* London, 1834.

say is not excelled in importance by any previous contribution, and constitutes a really valuable study. The conclusions which they draw are so instructive that I do not hesitate (though by no means indorsing them all) to transfer them without abbreviation :

" 1. That tenderness at one or more points of the spine is an attendant on almost all hysterical complaints, on numerous cases of functional disorder when the hysteric disposition is not so obvious, and in many nervous or neuralgic affections.

" 2. That many of the symptoms of these affections evidently depend upon a peculiar state of certain nerves, probably at their origin, may be reproduced at any moment by pressure, and are often relieved by remedies applied there.

" 3. That, in all cases of tenderness of the cervical and upper dorsal spine, there was nausea, or vomiting, or pain of stomach, or affections of the upper extremities; but no pain of the abdomen, dysury, ischury, hystericalgia, or affections of the lower extremities.

" 4. That, in all cases of dorsal tenderness, pains affecting the abdomen, bladder, uterus, testes, or lower extremities, were usual symptoms; while nausea, vomiting, or affections of the upper extremities, were never complained of.

" 5. That nausea and vomiting appeared to have more relation to tenderness of the cervical spine, pain of stomach to tenderness of dorsal; but that, when there was soreness of both, nausea or vomiting was still more frequent, and pain of the stomach scarcely ever absent.

" 6. That, when several points or a great extent of the spinal column is painful and tender on pressure,