

Perceiving Parkinson's

A Brief History Of The Shaking Palsy (Day 3)

The condition we know so well as Parkinson's today has accompanied humanity since ancient times. Before it was called Parkinson's, it was often referred to as **the shaking palsy**.

The earliest evidence of the shaking palsy possibly dates back to the Indian sage **Agnivesha**; it's hard to know exactly when he lived, but likely somewhere around 1000 BC. Agnivesha was one of the first authors of **Ayurveda**, the name for traditional Indian medicine. He compiled a Sanskrit text called the "Charaka Samhita" in which he provided a detailed description of tremors, including a description of something he referred to as **Kampavata** - a state of difficulty with movement, love of solitude, drowsiness, and stare. Kampavata may be the earliest known record of the shaking palsy.

Depictions of the shaking palsy may also exist in preserved documents from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. So, it's hard to be certain that Agnivesha was the first person to describe the condition - but at the very least, he was one of the first people to do so.

Later descriptions of the shaking palsy date to the time of the Greek physician and philosopher **Galen of Pergamon** (129-210 AD). Galen was the court physician of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus; next to the great Hippocrates, Galen was the most influential physician during the Greco-Roman era. He wrote a book called "De Tremore, Palpitatione, Convulsione, et Rigore" (which translates to "On Tremor, Palpitations, Convulsion, and Shivering") in which he carefully distinguished between different sorts of tremors, including the resting tremor of the shaking palsy.



Galen of Pergamon.

A century later the Chinese physician **Zhang Zihe** (1151-1231 AD) provided an astute portrayal of the shaking palsy. He characterized its essential features as tremor, stiffness, inexpressive facial features, loss of finger dexterity, and poor response to drugs (clearly, Zihe did not have access to levodopa at the time). Zihe's considered account of the condition was the best one up until that point in history.

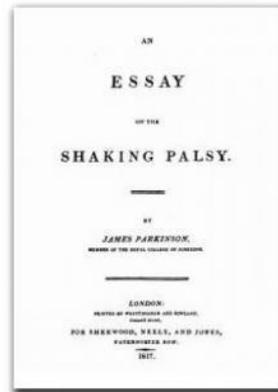
Several hundred years on the Italian polymath **Leonardo Da Vinci** (1452-1519) made specific mention of the shaking palsy, noting that two of the cardinal features were **paralitics** (difficulty with voluntary movement) and **tremanti** (tremor). It's rather astonishing that, in addition to his other considerable achievements, Da Vinci was one of the first people in history to describe the shaking palsy.

Later, the English poet and playwright **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) made a reference to the shaking palsy in his play King Henry VI, Act IV, Scene VII:

Dick: Why dost thou quiver, man?

Lord Say: It is the palsy, and not fear, provokes me.

Finally, in 1817 the English surgeon and apothecary **James Parkinson** wrote a humble paper entitled "A Brief History On The Shaking Palsy." As we have seen, he was not the first person to document the condition - not by a long shot. Yet what made Parkinson's paper special was that he provided the most comprehensive narrative of the shaking palsy ever written for the day and age, documenting the clinical features of six afflicted people several of whom he stumbled across as he strolled the streets of London. Not only did Parkinson succinctly describe many early and late features of the shaking palsy, he also clearly distinguished it from other, similar conditions.



Parkinson's paper.

Sadly, Parkinson died in relative obscurity 60 years before the French neurologist **Jean-Martin Charcot** changed the official name of the shaking palsy to Parkinson's disease. There are no known portraits of Parkinson; like the condition named after him, certain aspects of the man remain a mystery.

From these historical accounts, it seems that Parkinson's has existed alongside humanity for **at least three thousand years**. This is an important clue - whatever the origins of Parkinson's are, they've been with us for a very, very long time.

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References

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