Meningitis, Meninges, Meninx

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To the man or woman in the street, the word *meningitis* understandably conjures up feelings of terror, and invokes the spectre of a sudden, devastating and often fatal illness. The word *meningitis* is not found in medical writings until the end of the 18th century. But its root, the anatomical noun *meninx*, is of Greek and later Latin origin.

The word first appears in French, used by F. Herpin, *Méningitis, ou inflammation des membranes de l'encéphale* (1803). Derived from *méninge* + *-itis*, that implies inflammation, *méningité* was employed in French as early as 1793. The plural form, adding the Greek suffix *-ides*, is *meningitides*. An early spelling variation appeared in 1824 in the *Lancet*: 'A chronic menangitis ... will probably soon prove destructive to life.'

In 1828 the surgeon John Abercrombie defined the term (*Pathol Res Dis Brain* 51): '... I shall employ the term Meningitis to express the disease, meaning thereby the inflammation of the arachnoid, or pia mater, or both, as distinct from inflammation of the dura mater.'

In 1896, Heubner discovered meningococci from the cerebrospinal fluid of a case of meningitis [1]. 20th century refinements of laboratory techniques disclosed various aetiological agents: bacterial, viral, fungal, and neoplastic.

But meningitis has its verbal roots in the older anatomical term *meninx*, plural *meninges*. The OED tells us that *meninx* came from the post-classical Latin (attested about 1553 but probably earlier) whose plural form *meninges* is of 6th century origin. It was a later re-formation of *meninga* (4th century), derived in turn from ancient Greek *meninx*, meaning a membrane, especially of the brain or tympanum (both senses are in Aristotle). It reappeared in Middle French as *méninge* (1478; c 1370 in form *miringue*).

In English literature, *meninges* appeared in 1543 (Bartholomew Traheron, *The most excellent workes of chirurgerye made by J. Vigon*, tr. 1543 ... Pericranium): 'Whan the brayne pan is remoued, there appere two rymes, or thynne skynnes, called in greke meninges.'

The many words derived from *meninx* and *meninges* are well known: meningeal, meningioma, meningism, meningitic, meningo- (combined form), meningococcus, meningomyelitis.

Reference

- 1 Heubner JOL: Beobachtungen und Versuche über den Meningokokkus intracellularis (Weichselbaum-Jaeger). Dtsch Med Wochenschr 1896; 22:423. Jb Kinderheilk phys Erz, Berlin, 1896;43:1–22.