Narcolepsy

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The term 'narcolepsy' is the English form of the French word *narcolepsie*, which was coined in 1880 by the French physician Jean-Baptiste-Edouard Gélinau (1828–1906) [1]. The origin is from the Greek *narke* ('numbness', 'stupor') and *lepsis* ('attack', 'to seize'). Gélinau defined the condition as a specific clinical entity characterised by a compelling need to sleep for short duration. He considered it a functional condition or neurosis and did not distinguish between the sleep attacks and the episodes of muscle weakness. The term 'cataplexy', from the Greek *kataplexis* ('fixation of the eyes'), was first used by Löwenfeld [2] in 1902 to describe the episodes of muscle weakness triggered by emotions.

Gélinau was a naval physician and general practitioner in Rochefort, a 17th-century military base on the Atlantic coast. He moved to Paris in 1878 where he established a private neurological clinic. His star patient was a wine cask maker with narcolepsy reported in the Journal *La Gazette des Hôpitaux de Paris*. The attacks began at age 36 and lasted between 1 and 5 min and occurred up to 200 times per day. He proposed that narcolepsy was a form of normal sleep, which could be triggered by heightened emotions or physical exertion and at times a change in weather conditions. Although Gélinau was relatively unknown and unaffiliated with Charcot's circle of Parisian colleagues, the term 'narcolepsy' became generally accepted.

Early descriptions of narcolepsy were in case reports from the German physicians Westphal (1877) [3] and Fisher (1878) [4]. Many early 20th-century neurologists including William Gowers (1907) [5] and Kinnier Wilson (1928) [6] helped to identify the characteristic features and distinguish it from other conditions associated with more prolonged periods of sleep or other neurological diseases. Kinnier Wilson [6] coined the term 'sleep paralysis' in 1928. In 1957, Yoss and Daly [7] at the Mayo Clinic defined the classic tetrad of excessive daytime sleepiness, cataplexy, sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations.

References

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