Migraine

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It is said that Celsus (25 BC to AD 50) described the symptoms of migraine, but it was Galen of Pergamon (AD 131–201) who coined the term ‘hemicrania’ and Aretaeus of Cappadocia who used ‘heterocrania,’ both reflecting a unilateral headache. ‘Cranium’ derives from the Greek kranion, meaning skull. ‘Hemicrania’ was changed into the low-Latin ‘hemigranaea’, then ‘migranea’, and finally to migraine by the French in the late 14th century. In Old記事，it also had the sense ‘pique or vexation’. In 15th century English it appeared as migraine. ‘Megrim’ was another early English form (15th century). Alexander Pope, that master of the pithy couplet, wrote:

‘She sighs for ever on her pensive bed,
Pain at her side, and megrim at her head.’

The tangled symptoms patients related posed problems for physicians, still in the dark before the advent of modern science [1]; but their writings show how extraordinarily adept were their observations and attempts to identify different headaches [2]. One of the best descriptions came from Aretaeus, 1st century AD, who separated:

‘Cephalalgia’: infrequent, short lasting headache; ‘Cephalaea’: more severe and long-lasting headache, and ‘Heterocrania’: affection of one or the other side of the skull, with blackness before the eyes, sweating, nausea, bilious vomiting, collapse, and photophobia – plainly migraine.

Cefalikos (Greek for head) also appears after the 16th century in medical words: brachycephalic, cephalad, encephalitis, hydrocephalus.

A recognisable account, even earlier is found in the Corpus Hippocraticum:

‘Those who have headaches in fevers of this kind, and some blackness and then dimness before the eyes, or apparent scintillations,...’

Fifteenth century writings give dramatic depictions:

In 1420: ‘A fervent mygreyn was in The ryyght syde of hurre hedde’;

In 1460: ‘For... alle maner red eyne [eye] bleryd eyn & the myegrym also’.

The notion of migraine as a fashionable complaint, an affliction of the privileged and intelligent, is not new:

‘having as many dislikes as a fashionable lady with the megrims.’

A Baroness Bunsen proudly declared:

‘I am obliged to take to my bed by an unusual degree of migraine.’

And a 20th century writer observed:

‘The heavily corseted ladies who used to swoon all over the pages of Victorian literature, to whom migraines and vapours were an accepted state of feminine being.’

Migraine once had another meaning: giddiness. The Medical Journal of 1804 described:
‘A gentleman … suddenly attacked with a severe pain in his forehead, accompanied with so much megrim and stomach sickness, as would have caused him to fall…’

Depression was another usage: ‘blue devils, low spirits.’ Migraine also could describe a fad or whim. Other fads of treatment were widespread, used both by orthodox doctors and quacks.

‘This quackroyall is never so happy as when he’s telling them how many megrimicall and hypochondriacal humors he hath dissipated.’

From trephination of the skull, bloodletting, purgatives, diets varied and often bizarre, the patient was fortunate to survive. Modern drug therapy, despite its limitations may indeed be an improvement.

References
