Syringes and Syringomyelia

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What have a common, spring-flowering, scented, garden shrub, a channel in ancient rocks, an old wind instrument and the voice-box of birds in common? Answer: a syrinx.

Syrinx (plural – syringes) comes from the Greek *syrinx*, *surinx* – a pipe, tube, fistula or channel. Syrinx was the mythical musical pipe of Pan in Greek legend, often fashioned from reeds. In John Keats's *Endymion* we find:

'Pipes will I fashion of the syrinx flag.'

(Keats was famed as a poet but was also a medical doctor who died tragically young of tuberculosis.)

The word 'syrinx' has other interesting contexts. In archaeology, for example, a syrinx is a narrow rock-cut channel or tunnel, classically found in ancient Egyptian burial vaults. For ornithologists the syrinx is the lower larynx, the organ of the voice (shades of the merry merry pipes of Pan). *Syringa vulgaris*, the generic name of the lilac, was first applied to the beautifully scented *Philadelphus* (mock-orange) shrub, because its hollow stems were used for pipe-stems. Later Linnaeus applied the term to the *lilac*, formerly called the 'pipe-tree'.

'Syringobulbia' (Latin *bulbus* – onion, or bulb) we know as the abnormal cavities in the medulla that dissect into the slits in the cord's grey matter as 'syringomyelia' (Greek *myelos* – the marrow), and 'syringotomy' is the operation made to drain the cavity (Greek *tomos* – cutting).

The earliest description of cavities in the cord is generally ascribed to Charles Estienne (1504–c.1564) in *La dissection des parties du corps humain*... Paris, 1546. But the first use of the term 'syringomyelia' was probably that of Charles P. Oliviers d'Anger in *De la moelle épinière et ses maladies* in 1824; in a later two-volume work he described:

'Syringomyélie ou cavité centrale dans la moelle'.

The association with the Arnold-Chiari malformation was later recognised.

'Syringotomy' was the operation to open any type of fistula by means of a 'syringotome'; it is recorded in 1753, but was then not related to the neurological illness.

The name 'syringe', used since the early 15th century in English, interestingly relates to the alternate sucking and blowing of water to and from the respiratory organs that enables the *Syringograde* animals to swim. The beautiful floating echinoderm *Holothuria* is an example.

Reference

- 1 Pearce JMS: Arnold Chiari, or 'Cruveilhier Cleland Chiari' malformation. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2000;68:13.