Neurological Words

Vagus

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I can think of nerves with a more circuitous course than the vagus, but it is the longest cranial nerve. Its name derives from its extensive course through neck, thorax and abdomen. 'Vagus' comes from the Latin vagus, which means 'to wander’. The word has an ancient and interesting history, and has several curious derivative forms. Neither ‘vagus’ nor ‘pneumogastric’ appear in my copy of Vesalius’s De humani corporis fabrica (1543) [1], but the description of the ‘sixth pair’ (of cranial nerves) corresponds to the vagus nerve.

It is synonymous with the older ‘pneumogastric nerve’, mentioned for instance in 1840 by E. Wilson in Anat Vade Mecum: ‘The Pneumogastric Nerve (vagus) arises by numerous filaments from the respiratory tract immediately below the glosso-pharyngeal.’ In 1876, the Lumleian lectures delivered at the Royal College of Physicians of London by Samuel Osborne Habershon were entitled ‘On the pathology of the pneumogastric nerve’.

Vagotonia was first noted in 1916 (OED), it describes increased excitability of the vagus nerve.

The French adjective vague (13th century) meant ‘couched’ in general or indefinite terms; not definitely or precisely expressed. One of its oldest uses dates to the 14th century, where the noun vacation or vagacion was the act of wandering (from the Latin vagari).

In the early 16th century it was used to mean a prank or trick, as in the phrase to play one’s vagues.

Vagous signified ‘exceeding just or ordinary bounds’; it is now obsolete but was used in 1710 by T. Fuller (Pharm Extemp 78): ‘The whole throng of Physicians crieth it up to cure vagous Pains.’

The word ‘vagrant’ is found in a Parliamentary Roll of 1444 (OED): a person who having no settled home or regular work wanders from place to place, and maintain themselves by begging or in some other disreputable or dishonest way; an itinerant beggar, idle loafer, tramp, or vagabond.

Vague is also an occasional verb meaning to wander, to range, roam or to ramble idly or as a vagrant.

Vagulous and vagualte were used almost exclusively by the English novelist Virginia Woolf. In modern French literature vague is used for a movement, trend or vogue, for example ‘nouvelle vague’.

Vagus: truly a word that has wandered.

Reference