



Saints and pseudo-Seizures - A Christmas story

WILLIAM FEINDEL, OC, MDCM, DPHIL¹

It was a few weeks before the Christmas of 1951, and all through the Neuro the surgeons were busily stirring. Dr. Penfield operated on a young man (P.S.) sent from Paris by Dr. Henry Hécaen because of seizures for thirteen years. Herbert Jasper had found epileptic spiking in the anterior temporal region. At operation spikes were recorded from the temporal cortex and also from the amygdala, from which stimulation evoked one of the patient's typical attacks of confusion and automatic movement for which he had no recall afterwards (Fig. 1). During the temporal lobe excision an unexpected low grade

glioma was also removed. (Today this would have been detected on MRI - see Neuro-Image for February 1989). Before operation the young man's seizures were vivid - he would describe colored lights - purple, violet, blue and yellow - and at night, green stars. In other attacks he heard bells or would hum a tune. In still another, he was convinced that he was dead and in heaven - he saw violet and blue saints and began to pray over and over again. When questioned later, he seemed to recall this as not just a dream, but the real thing.

His post-operative course, as surgeons say, was uneventful. Everyone was

pleased that he had no more of these fearful attacks and elaborate hallucinations. It was nearing Christmas and he was eagerly making plans to return with his father to France.

But before he left hospital, a curious and distressing episode occurred. The Neuro then, perhaps more than at any time in its history, was jammed with patients. The Military Annex of some 30 beds had been demolished to make way for the McConnell Pavilion and its eighty new beds, still under construction. To accommodate the heavy admissions, especially the

(suite à la page 8)

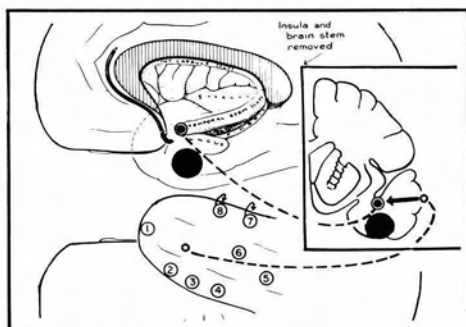


Figure 1 - Depth stimulation at operation in the anterior and lateral part of the amygdala producing automatism in case P.S. The solid circles indicate the site of the small glioma.

Figure 2 - The temporal lobe dissected and laid aside shows the position of the amygdala (stippled) between the temporal stem and the uncus at the tip of the temporal horn of the ventricle. (Both figures modified from Feindel and Penfield, 1954).

