Through the Looking Glass, Another Look at Migraine

Abstract:

Sir

"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."
--"I don't see," said the Caterpillar.
--"I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."
"It isn't," said the Caterpillar. (from Alice in Wonderland)

It was said that ''Alice trod the path of a wonderland well known to her creator.'' [1] Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the author, or as he was more commonly known, Lewis Carroll, was one such literary great afflicted by migraine and yet said to be inspired by his migrainous attacks in creating Alice and her magical wonderland.

Diary Entries

In a diary entry from January 17 1856, Carroll noted: ''Consulted Mr Bowman, the oculist, about my right eye: he does not seem to think anything can be done to remedy it, but recommends me not to read long at a time, nor at the railway, and to keep to large type by candlelight''. [2] This most likely alluded to his right-sided paracentral negative scotoma as depicted in his frontispiece drawing from Mischmasch, which he compiled in 1855. It is interesting to note that the character depicted has parts of his head, shoulder, wrist and hand missing, in keeping with the rounded border defect seen in a negative scotoma. Carroll mentions in another diary entry from 1885, having ''experienced, for the second time, that odd optical affection of seeing moving fortifications, followed by a head-ache.'' [2] Unfortunately, Carroll continued to suffer from visual aura type symptoms; over the following years, without headache, suggesting an acephalgic migraine as his primary diagnosis. 1888 ''Dec 3. Again experienced the optical 'fortifications'. It began with a distinct loss of a large piece of the area of vision of the left eye, the blind patch being in the right hand corner, just where, directly afterwards, the 'fortifications' appeared.'' In another diary entry almost a year later, Carroll writes: 1889 ''Sept 9 Also today I saw 'fortifications' but no headache followed.'' [2]

Alice in Wonderland

The term 'Alice in Wonderland syndrome' was coined by Todd in 1955 to describe somesthetic aura, involving distortions of body image which are predominantly found amongst migraine sufferers, but also featured in Lewis Carroll's writing. Alice, the main protagonist in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and its sequel, Through the Looking Glass (1871), appeared to undergo various size changes throughout the course of the story. She even feels her body shrinking (microsomatognosia), and growing inexplicably taller (macrosomatognosia). Such distortions can also occur after seizures, drug intoxication, and may be described in patients with cerebral lesions or schizophrenia. [3] [4] Other described symptoms include illusory changes in the size, distance, or position of stationary objects in the subject's visual field.

Literary inspiration or just coincidence?

Lewis Carroll died in 1898 after succumbing to a 'feverish cold, of the bronchial type'. [2] We cannot ask him directly whether his writings were inspired by his migrainous experiences, but can only surmise that some literary inspiration was gained from these episodes. In the late nineties a flurry of letters appeared in the Lancet debating this very topic. [5] The truth of the matter is, we will never know for sure, but the childlike qualities of his books and the imaginary world he created lives on for generations of children and adults to enjoy.

R Martin
Pavilion Road, Castlebar, Co. Mayo
Email: ruthmartin20@gmail.com

References

1. Lippman CW. Certain hallucinations peculiar to migraine. J Nerv Ment Dis 1952; 116: 346-51.
2. Green RL, ed. The Diaries of Lewis Carroll. London: Cassell & Co, 1953.
3. Todd J. The syndrome of Alice in Wonderland. Can Med Assoc J 1955; 73: 701-04.
4. Kew J, Wright A, Halligan PW. Somesthetic aura: the experience of ''Alice in Wonderland''. Lancet 1998; 351:1934.
5. Blau JN. Somesthetic aura: the experience of ''Alice in Wonderland''. Lancet 1998; 352: 582.