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History of ophthalmology

Couching for cataract – the suttiah's tale

Operations for depressing the lens and curing cataract were described in AD 37 by Celcus, who compiled a medical encyclopaedia during Tiberius's reign. The technique persisted unchanged, and at the turn of this century it was observed by British ophthalmologists working in India. They were not impressed. R H Elliot describes the method as 'crude and filthy', and Drake-Brockman decries it in terms which would make a suttiah's ears burn (suttiah being the Hindu term for oculist).

The suttiah travelled constantly, conducting his daily business roughly as follows: patients (with eye disease from cataract, infection, trauma, or any cause whatsoever) would trustingly settle cross legged in the dust for 'removal of their cataract'. Requesting a bowl of water, the oculist took the lancet out of his instrument pouch, casually twisted a bit of cotton around his finger, and wrapped it round the blade, leaving about four millimetres free. His copper instruments would look markedly rough and unfinished to us, but as they were handed down from his father, the suttiah prized them highly.

He would make no attempt to wash in the water, it was for another purpose entirely. Having assured everyone that miraculous cures were imminent, he would instruct a relative to squat behind the patient with his arms firmly around the patient's body. Holding his lancet, the suttiah would wipe sweat from his own eyes and the patient's and begin, everting the lid and steadying the globe with one finger. Additional relatives were probably recruited at this stage if the patient resisted. Choosing a point close to the cornea, in the lower outer quadrant, the suttiah jabbed his lancet into the eye until penetration was checked by the twist of cotton. It was then withdrawn. Looking down, the suttiah then picked up his needle. This was inserted into the vitreous and moved around vigorously in order to depress the lens.

Undoubtedly, some suttiahs showed slicker hand movement than others. The same scene with a truly clumsy one is painful to imagine, but as the trade was handed down from father to son rather than by skill it must have happened. The needle was then stilled and the patient asked if he could see. If not, the motions were continued (perhaps more feverishly). Presumably the patient was often told that the return of sight would take some time (that is, after the suttiah had left town). After withdrawal, the needle was put into the water, and the suttiah fished out and

displayed the tiny bit of membrane (which he had thrown in beforehand) saying 'here is the membrane that has destroyed your sight!' Payment was then required. If there was no money the suttiah entered the patient's dwelling, taking food, cooking pots, or cloth to the value of his fee. Many suttiahs gave special rates for old people, and in these cases covered the patient's head with a cloth and performed the operation in darkness. Removing the cloth, the patient was asked whether he could see (a prime example of a leading question) and the suttiah left hastily.

What actually happened within the eye during all this was studied by Elliot who, during a long and vitriolic campaign against couching, got hold of 54 specimens of operated globes. Although forward dislocation of the lens occurred occasionally, backward dislocation was the rule. 'Couched' lenses were found floating in the vitreous, hopelessly entangled in exudate within it, and fixed to the iris or ciliary body by masses of scar tissue. In many cases the retina was detached – Elliot attributes this to severe septic infection within the globe.

Concluding that only 20% of operations yielded a discernible increase in vision, Elliot presented the globes to the the Royal College of Surgeons, where unfortunately they were destroyed by wartime bombing in 1941. Whether Elliot ever got hold of an actual suttiah is not stated. Undoubtedly, they and their lore were very elusive. Drake-Brockman spent 22 years unsuccessfully trying to get a set of instruments from a suttiah. When his nephew finally procured a set (presumably by foul play) in 1895, Drake-Brockman presented them to the Ophthalmological Society with glee. Elliot presented a set to the Royal College of Surgeons in 1922. They are there today. Back in 1895, it was agreed that they looked 'extremely crude and damaging', and that the suttiahs' trade was causing widespread destruction of sight. It is interesting to speculate whether in any Indian villages, the suttiah still visits, plying instruments which – remembering the strict father-to-son rule – may date from before the eighteenth century.

FIONA ROMAN

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