

Hysteria: The rise of an enigma, J. Bogousslavsky, editor (Karger, Basel, Switzerland) 2014. 210 pages. Price: not mentioned
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This book is a compilation of 18 comprehensive and readable essays. Hysteria has been a fascinating topic for centuries. It continues to be a clinical dilemma and a challenge even today. Thus, in this context, this book is also a collection of the developments and current status of this interesting topic. The term hysteria went into disrepute and has been replaced by conversion and dissociation disorders, which are rather inadequate and fail to communicate the mystique of hysteria.

The book starts with the essays on the historical understanding and development of the concept starting with the socio-economic background of hysteria of the 18th century to the World War I and then the epidemiology of hysteria. The latter essays have looked at the current status of hysteria around the world, its treatment, and hysteria today and tomorrow. Though the book gives a comprehensive global and historical overview of hysteria, it leaves the reader with curiosity and enchantment, for which this topic is well known.

The book gradually develops on the previous understanding of hysteria based on erstwhile explanatory models, psychoanalysis, psychodynamics

and other psychological mechanisms. It concludes with the role of functional neuroimaging and neural circuits in the causation of hysteria. It is a balanced book which provides both controversies as well as the clinical outlook of hysteria. The essays in this book will dispel misgivings about hysteria among health professionals and general public. As the editor points out in the preface that hysterical symptoms were/are considered as neurological by psychiatrists, and a psychiatric condition by neurologists, the study of hysteria by modern technology of imaging and neurophysiology is likely to unravel many more mysteries of the mind and brain.

This book would interest not only psychiatrists, psychologists and mental health professionals but also neurologists and medical physicians since they are all likely to encounter causes of hysteria in their clinical practice. Certain essays discussing hysteria in the novels and medical shows may attract even those who are not health professionals to read this collection.

This book has a good collection of rare pictures of documents and various practitioners of the last few centuries. The authors of individual chapters are from France, or Switzerland (the editor) and have thus focused on the presentations in the European countries. Hysterical presentations in the developed world have become extinct or metamorphosed, but these are still widely prevalent in the developing countries and the Indian subcontinent. Some of these forms of dissociation and hysteria like trance, fugues and possessions, and their association with religion and spirituality are conspicuous by their absence. Hysteria lives on, under different guises and forms, along with its ghosts, so even if, hysteria sees an end in medical practice, the ghost would live forever.

This is a gripping book, difficult to put down and almost reads like a thriller or a novel. It is advisable for most medical practitioners to read. It should find a place in all medical libraries or libraries of history of medicine. It should also be a mandatory reading for all mental health professionals. Overall, it would be an enjoyable book to read and understand the concept of hysteria – the charming disorder!

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