Robert Bárány 1876–1936

Robert Bárány was educated at the University of Vienna, graduating in medicine in 1900. In 1903, he accepted an appointment at the University of Vienna otology clinic working in the department of Adam Politzer, who had established the specialty in Austria. Here he began his studies exploring the equilibrium system of the ear and the brain. Among his contributions was a test, now called the Bárány test, for diagnosing diseases of the semicircular canals of the inner ear by syringing the ear with either hot or cold water. He noted nystagmus when the water was above or below, but not at body temperature. He concluded that with caloric nystagmus, the endolymph, normally at body temperature, displaced itself when it came into contact with water. He noted that vestibular nerve transmitted the thermal disturbance within the endolymph to the brain. His work led to the development of the Bárány rotating chair, which demonstrated the relationship between the vestibular system, the nervous system, and centres within the cerebellum. In 1913, he investigated the somatopic localisation in the cerebellum and postulated that the vermis was concerned with coordinated movements of the trunk, the hemisphere with the extremities, and the flocculus with movements of the eyes.

Bárány received the Nobel Prize in 1914 for his development of clinical investigation of the human equilibrium system. He essentially founded a new area of medical science and practice. At the time of this award, which was delayed until 1915 by the outbreak of World War I, he was a prisoner of war in Siberia. When Austria entered the war, Bárány saw an opportunity to investigate his ideas with brain injured soldiers. He volunteered for medical service and was assigned to the fortress of Przemysl in Galicia (now Poland) to provide care for 123,000 men. There he built an otolaryngology unit, and developed a very successful primary suture technique for the suture of head wounds. He was captured there by advancing Russian troops in April 1915 and taken prisoner. After Prince Carl of Sweden persuaded Czar Nicholas I to release Bárány, the Swedish Red Cross negotiated his release and emigration to Sweden. He became director of the otorhinolaryngology clinic at the University of Uppsala, Sweden in 1917, and in 1926 became a full professor there. In 1921 he became the first to describe positional vertigo.

Upon his death, the University of Uppsala established the Bárány medal, to be awarded at 5 year intervals to the most outstanding scientist in the field of the vestibular research. The Bárány society was founded in his honour by C S Hallpike and C O Nylen in 1960.

Bárány is portrayed here on a stamp issued by Austria in 1976, the centenary of his birth (Stanley Gibbons no. 1756, Scott no. 1031).

L F Haas
Department of Neurology, Wellington Hospital, Private Bag 7902, Riddiford Street, Wellington, New Zealand; lhass@xtra.co.nz

doi: 10.1136/jnnp.2004.055277