NEUROLOGICAL PICTURE

Carl Wilhelm Ideler (1795–1860): a controversial German psychiatrist of the 19th century

Within the historiography of medicine, Carl Wilhelm Ideler is generally considered to be one of the most controversial German psychiatrists of the 19th century. For many years he was thought to be the epitome of psychiatry's antiquated, philosophical and speculative side. Yet if we push beyond the dusty facade and examine his work more closely, there are aspects of his thinking worthy of interest.

Ideler was born the son of a pastor on 25 October 1795. In 1811 his uncle, the well-known royal astronomer and mathematician Christian Ludwig Ideler (1766–1846), obtained a place for him to study at the Péninière (as from the 1818 Friedrich-Wilhelm-Institut). After studying medicine, Ideler practised for a while before turning to psychiatry, and in 1828 he moved back to Berlin. In 1830 he was appointed chief of psychiatry at the Charité, Prussia's largest psychiatric institution at that time, and in 1839 he was appointed professor of psychiatry at Berlin University, posts that he held until his death in 1860.

Figure 1 Carl Wilhelm Ideler (1795–1860). From Kirchhoff T. *Deutsche Irrenärzte*. Berlin: Springer, 1921:153.

Ideler was primarily interested in the non-somatic causes of mental illness, although he certainly accepted somatic causes as well.^{1,2} He pointed out the importance of the passions in the genesis of insanity and questioned how they could be so poorly controlled. This line of questioning eventually led to a central point in Ideler's psychiatric thinking: drives. According to Ideler, drives are elements of the mind. They help satisfy human needs and are consequently necessary components of human life. Each drive develops on its own. Certain external influences and a lack of morals can lead to drive disharmony. One drive may develop at the expense of others and lead to an imbalance—namely, to insanity. Knowledge of the existence of the drives and the realisation of the necessity of their uniform development was an important premise for the maintenance of psychic health and a harmonious mental life. Those who are unable to achieve this state on their own, however, are prone to insanity and need a doctor's help. This is why only a moral and well-educated doctor should practise psychiatry. In addition to his drive psychology, which certainly shows parallels with Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) later psychoanalytical ideas, Ideler's biographic-psychogenic approach is also noteworthy. In his case studies, he made particular use of the newly established discipline of forensic psychiatry, thereby helping to validate it.^{3,4} He emphasised the necessity of a comprehensive psychological examination that takes into consideration personal history, mental and physical peculiarities and also the social milieu and situation in which delinquent acts are committed. Ideler thought it particularly important to view people in their entirety; he strove to heal the ailing person, not the illness. This kind of comprehensive, anthropological approach makes good sense in the age of scientific medicine.

Ideler died on 29 July 1860 in Kumbosen.

**K Haack
E Kumbier**

Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Rostock University, Rostock, Germany

Correspondence to: Dr Ekkehardt Kumbier, Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Rostock University, Gehlsheimer Straße 20, D-18147 Rostock, Germany; ekkehardt.kumbier@medizin.uni-rostock.de

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