"Phlebomania Hancocksia": prevalence of a previously undescribed psychomotor disturbance

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While we were taking blood samples from cardiac surgical patients to study platelet function and blood loss¹⁻³ we observed a common phenomenon. Several patients asked how much blood was going to be taken, and a proportion of them responded uniformly to the reply that it was to be only enough for one large syringe. They first appeared shocked, uttering: "What, that's almost a whole armful!" A hysterical phase manifest by uncontrollable laughter would then follow, usually ending in an apology in response to the concern of medical staff. As a means of explanation the afflicted patient would often utter a bisyllabic word sounding like Hancock.

This psychomotor disturbance with its unique combination of bizarre facial expression and a common vocalisation phase terminated by apparent hysteria seems to be uniquely associated with phlebotomy, and I suggest the term "phlebomania Hancocksia" to describe it. I report the prevalence of this disorder in cardiac surgical patients.

Patients, methods, and results

I prospectively diagnosed and recorded the presence of phlebomania Hancocksia in 290 cardiac surgical patients involved in the study.¹⁻³ Fifty two patients (18%) showed the disturbance. There was no significant difference between those with or without the disturbance in the mean number of grafts required, preoperative ventricular function, the number or type of drugs taken, presence of carotid bruits, or history of cerebrovascular accidents. The only differences apparent between the two groups were the age and sex distribution of the patients. The mean age of those with phlebomania Hancocksia was only slightly higher than that of those without the disorder (65 (range 53-77) v 63 (37-85); $P=0.32$, Mann-Whitney U test). However, none of the 29 patients under the age of 48 years in the study population (10%) had the disturbance ($P=0.004$, Fisher's exact test). All 52 of those with the disturbance were men, compared with 177 of the 238 (74%) without the disorder ($P=0.00009$).

Comment

Readers of the *BMJ* who are old enough are probably aware of the cause of phlebomania Hancocksia. The first known case of this condition is shown in figure 1. The original outbreak in 1961 seems to have made a lasting impression on a proportion of the population who were exposed to it. Those who were under 18 at the time seem to have been comparatively protected from any long term effect. They would have been under the age of 48 at the time of the study.

The reason for the universal association of phlebomania Hancocksia with male sex is unclear. It may be related to the apparently well recognised, completely unjustified belief among men that their humour is original (K John, personal communication).

Perhaps the most interesting facet of this condition is the manner in which some events enter national consciousness. What people were doing when they heard of the assassination of John F Kennedy is remembered by many. This is unsurprising, although it happened over 30 years ago, given the importance of the man. What is surprising is that a single line from a comedy broadcast a similar time ago is also remembered and reproduced appropriately by a significant number of people who had heard it at that time. It is a tribute to the genius of the first known sufferer of phlebomania Hancocksia that it is being described 35 years after its first occurrence.

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Fig 1—Tony Hancock, Patrick Cargill, and associates in "The Blood Donor," first broadcast in 1961

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