

The worst of evils: the fight against pain

By Thomas Dormandy. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2006. 560 pp. £19.99.

The worst of evils is clearly a labour of love, the culmination of a lifetime's study of the subject of the history of medicine, in particular the history of anaesthesia, and as such it should be lauded.

In over 500 pages, with numerous footnotes, Dormandy gives a detailed account of the developments that have occurred in pain management over more than two millennia. As in any good history, the main story is about the people who have instigated the changes, and they are shown, warts and all. Hardly anyone is allowed to pass away without their death being recorded by date, place (Erb died during a performance of Brahms's Fourth Symphony) and manner (St Artemis was speared through his anus).

It is written, predominantly for a non-medical audience, by Dormandy, a retired chemical pathologist, and is a wealth of information, but for the medical reader it is necessary to read through a lot of information about anatomy, physiology and pathology, not all of which is correct (for example the mitral valve separates the right auricle from the right ventricle), which some might find detracts from the essential basis of the work.

The reader is taken through the developments of medicine in Hellenic times when there were few agents which could relieve pain other than herbs and roots, yet which provided a large material medica, with very brief comments on medicine in the Far and Middle East. There are commentaries about the various cultural changes and religious developments which had an impact upon the way in which pain was envisaged, sometimes being something to be ignored, or sometimes to be welcomed, with the Clementine view that 'to suffer pain in the service of God is laudable', even though this was part of an edict to put an end to an epidemic of self-flagellation.

A large section of the book deals with the development of anaesthesia, and contains lurid descriptions of the horrors of operating without it, implying that the surgeons hated it as much as the patient. With the development of anaesthesia came the introduction of chloroform, which in turn, was to herald the development of obstetric analgesia.

New drugs would be introduced, or rather re-introduced, to medicine, but all brought their own terrors. Cocaine and opium brought analgesia and relief from the struggles of life, but with the fear of addiction. The bark of the willow was known to relieve the agues, and in time the active ingredient of salicylic acid was found, but this led on to aspirin, and the development of the pharmaceutical industry.

The final 100 pages are devoted to developments in the 20th century, including a whole chapter on Renouir, covering the discovery of the barbiturates and other modern drugs. It is noteworthy that only twenty pages are used to discuss the current theories of pain management, pain clinics and hospices.

One chapter is entitled 'The seminal years' and covers the early part of the 20th century and many well-known names, such as Cajal, Golgi, Sherrington, Pavlov and many more. I believe Dormandy feels that we have left behind a golden age of great advances in medicine, the likes of which will never be seen again,

with almost disbelief that the start of the next century can repeat it. Can we honestly say with regard to transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation that 'it is too early to say how successful it will eventually prove to be' when it is used by thousands of people on a daily basis to alleviate pain, or to say of congenital analgesia that 'its causation remains a mystery', even though the genetic basis has been known for some years?

There are other aspects of this book that I found unhelpful, the main criticism is that none of the paintings were reproduced in colour, particularly the Grünwald crucifixion (although I am not sure that this is the greatest representation of suffering in painting). There are also many typographical errors, particularly in the footnotes.

What I failed to find was a discussion about the title of the book, a quote from Milton's *Paradise lost*, which seems to be taken for granted, but as Dormandy himself states 'The present book is a history, not a polemical tract'. Is pain the worst of evils? As a specialist in pain management I cannot agree, as much has been done in recent years to alleviate pain. Pain can destroy the person and their life, but it does not kill. Poverty and malnutrition do.

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