From the uterus to the mind – the conceptual evolution of Hysteria

Tânia Abreu¹ and Geraldo Oliveira¹


Abstract

Introduction: The concept of Hysteria has been changing for four thousand years. Its inconstancy has been influenced by the socio-cultural context in each period of History.

Objectives: The authors aim to summarize the evolution of the concept of Hysteria from 1900 b.C. to the present.

Methods: Review of the literature.

Results: Egyptians initiated the descriptions about Hysteria, describing a uterus that wandered through the body causing the symptoms. The Wandering Womb Theory lasted for many centuries. Hippocrates spoke about the “suffocation of the womb” around 400 b.C.. In the second century, Galen refuted this theory, relating Hysteria to sexual dissatisfaction and a secretion of the uterus. In the Middle Age, Hysteria was associated with sin and demonic possession, being treated by exorcism and later leading to the execution of countless women by fire. In the 16th century, the Hippocrates and Galen’s ideas were resumed. The “Suffocation of the Mother” was caused by vapors arising from the uterus. By this time, emotional causes began to be considered, but the paradigm shifts started in the 17th century. Sydenham spoke of a common multifactorial chronic disease, determined by physical and psychological factors that could affect both sexes. In the 18th century, the uterus returned, this time associated with the theories of the cerebral and spinal irritation and reflex arcs. By the 19th century, Hysteria was epidemic and treated by genital massage. At the same time, it was starting to be considered a mental disorder with the works of Griesinger, Briquet and others. Charcot marked an important turn at the Salpêtrière Hospital, leading the way to his followers, like Freud and Janet, to explore Hysteria. Freud introduced the association to repressed child sexual conflict. Treatments were focused on hypnosis and, later, psychoanalysis. Currently, the concept of Hysteria is fragmented in different disorders: dissociative, somatic and histrionic personality disorder.

Discussion and Conclusion: After four millennia, there is no consensus about Hysteria. For some it is lost, for others it is still present, often with a negative connotation.

Supplementary material: Complete presentation available at http://ijcnmh.arc-publishing.org