

CEREBRAL BERI BERI

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In 1942, during World War 2, some 32,000 soldiers of the British Army found themselves incarcerated as prisoners of war in Singapore after it capitulated to the Japanese. Before long men started dying of an illness which often included in its early stages external ophthalmoplegia and diplopia and ended fatally following a period of coma. De Wardener and Lennox, as medical officers in Roberts Hospital, Changi, were given a roaming remit by Colonel 'Weary' Dunlop to investigate the cause of this illness. They documented its clinical features in detail, and noted its similarity to a syndrome described in a paper by Wernicke many years before. This report had been based on a small number of terminal patients and it did not describe the early stages of the syndrome. De Wardener and Lennox carried out post-mortems, but lack of fixing materials meant that brain examination had to be by naked eye only. Nevertheless they were able to describe punctate midbrain haemorrhages and they concluded, from the clinical and pathological evidence that the condition was due to thiamine deficiency. They coined the term 'Cerebral Beri Beri'. Their judicious administration of the meagre amounts of thiamine in their possession led to dramatic clinical improvement in what otherwise was a relentlessly progressive and fatal condition.

De Wardener and Lennox's paper (1) is noteworthy for its clarity and detailed clinical description of Cerebral Beri Beri from its onset to death. They carried out this study in the face of many hazards: they suffered recurrent attacks of dysentery: random brutality on the part of their captors was the norm: their post-mortem instruments were confiscated: they were not allowed to have writing material and so it was very difficult to record their findings. They buried in a jungle grave what records they were able to keep in secret. The way in which these were recovered after hostilities ceased is remarkable in itself, and is a suitable conclusion to this example of the way excellence in the practice of medicine can be achieved by some in spite of severely hostile circumstances.

Reference:

1) de Wardener HE and Lennox B (1947) Cerebral Beri Beri (Wernicke's encephalopathy). A Review of 52 cases in a Singapore Prisoner of War Camp. *Lancet* **1**, 11-17.