



A History of Multiple Sclerosis (Healing Society, Disease, Medicine, and History)

Colin L. Talley

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While we now recognize that MS is a common neurological disease, as late as the early twentieth century it was considered a relatively rare condition in Europe and the United States. It was only in the late 1860s that MS came to be generally recognized as a distinct disease apart from other paraplegic maladies. One of the important historical questions about MS is whether it was a new disease of the nineteenth century or one that had simply gone unrecognized for a long time. Answering this question is complicated by the different frames or ways physicians understood and explained disease in previous centuries. The way we now conceive, categorize, and explain disease is a relatively recent formulation in the long view of medical history.

This work aims to answer some of the fundamental questions of the history of MS. How and why did MS emerge when and where it did, first in a book of pathological anatomy in early nineteenth-century France, then as a distinct disease category in France by 1868? How and why did the perception of MS as a rare disease in the early twentieth century change so that by the middle of that century it was considered a common affliction of the nervous system? How did local conditions shape research on MS? Why did MS emerge as a popular crusade and research priority, rather suddenly, in the late 1940s and early 1950s? How has the experience of people with MS changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries? Since there was no consensus about the merits of any treatment until very recently, how does one explain the sometimes aggressive treatment of disease from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century? This book focuses in part on how sociocultural factors allowed MS to emerge into medical awareness and later popular consciousness and how the different scientific and sociocultural frames of disease affected the experience of people with MS. These factors were important in particular ways because of the peculiar disease process of MS, especially its tendency to wax and wane in many patients and in clinical symptoms.

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