

Generally the syndrome is thought to be caused by patients "playing" with their pacemaker, hence the name twiddler. Few, if any, patients admit to such interference, but convincing their doctors of their innocence may be difficult. Are they guilty? Could this 9 year old Weimaraner have twiddled his pacemaker (situated on the superior aspect of his neck) with his hind paws? We believe that rotation of the pacemaker caused by local muscular action during normal activities is more likely.

- 1 Bayliss CE, Beanlands DS, Baird RJ. The pacemaker twiddler's syndrome: a new complication of implantable transvenous pacemakers. *Can Med Assoc J* 1968;99:371.
- 2 Sorkin RP, Schurmann BJ, Simon AB. Radiographic aspects of permanent cardiac pacemakers. *Radiology* 1976;119:281-6.
- 3 Tegtmeyer CJ, Deignan JM. The cardiac pacemaker: a different twist. *American Journal of Roentgenology* 1976;126:1017.
- 4 Darke PGG, Been M, Marks A. Use of a programmable, "physiological" cardiac pacemaker in a dog with total atrioventricular block (with some comments on complications associated with cardiac pacemakers). *Journal of Small Animal Practice* 1985;26:295-303.
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Cauliflower ears, opium, and Errol Flynn

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The appearance of cauliflower ears in elderly Chinese patients may indicate a history of opium abuse.

Case report

An 81 year old Chinese gentleman was admitted to hospital with pulmonary tuberculosis and renal failure. He was born in Canton in southern China in 1907 during the final years of the Ching dynasty. He received no formal education and began working as a labourer during his childhood. His father, grandfather, and most of their men friends and relatives regularly took opium. It was unusual for women to smoke opium at that time and his mother abstained.

The patient began to use opium regularly at the age of 20 and quickly became addicted, smoking two pipes daily for most of his life. Smoking took place in one of

the many dens which were often built of stone and were furnished with several wooden or stone beds (fig 1). Opium was freely available and could be bought either in the dens or from street sellers. At that time the drug was sold in the form of a black paste which was stored in jars and could be bought by the scoop.

In the 1920s each pipe of opium would cost the equivalent of half a pence which represented one quarter of a coolie's daily income. The expense of the patient's addiction is the reason he gives for never having married. In the early 1930s the patient moved to Hong Kong where he continued to take opium regularly, finally giving up the habit at the age of 70 because of frequent arrests by the police.

The patient gave no past history of contact sport such as boxing or rugby football, or other activities likely to lead to auricular trauma. On examination bilateral swollen and mishapen auricles or cauliflower ears were observed (fig 2).

Comment

In the late eighteenth century trade between China and Great Britain was active. The protectionist policy of the Chinese administration ensured that tea and silk



FIG 1—Chinese opium smokers 1841. Drawn by T Allom, engraved by G Paterson

were exchanged only for silver and gold. In an attempt to correct the resulting trade deficit the British began to transport opium from Bengal to China. The opium trade boomed and opium usage increased rapidly.

In 1838 Emperor Dai Kuang was alarmed at the growing numbers of addicts and attempted to crush the opium trade. Large amounts of opium were confiscated and destroyed by mixing it with lime in open pits. The political consequences of this action and the subsequent opium wars resulted in the British occupation of Hong Kong in 1841.

Throughout the following century opium remained freely available and at times was a government monopoly. Although the opium trade eventually ceased, the trafficking and possession of opiates was not made illegal in Hong Kong until 1946.

As a result of such recent widespread opiate abuse there is a population of elderly addicts who may have been taking opiates in one form or another for 50 years or more. Of the population of known drug addicts in Hong Kong reported from 1977 to 1986, 35.5% were aged 50 years or older.¹ Being called on to deal with an octogenarian who has forsaken his zimmer frame to "chase the dragon" in the ward toilet is an occasional part of hospital life. (Chasing the dragon is a colloquial expression for the method of opiate administration by fume inhalation.) Several such patients have cauliflower ears.

An earlier report of the association between opium abuse and auricular trauma may be found in the autobiography of the film star Errol Flynn.² During a visit to Hong Kong in 1932 Flynn described a brief encounter with Ting Ling, a woman companion who surprised him with her ability to correctly identify opium addicts by the abnormal shape of one or both ears. She attributed her skill to the recognition of swollen, misshapen auricles, which resulted from long periods of opium induced slumber while laying on

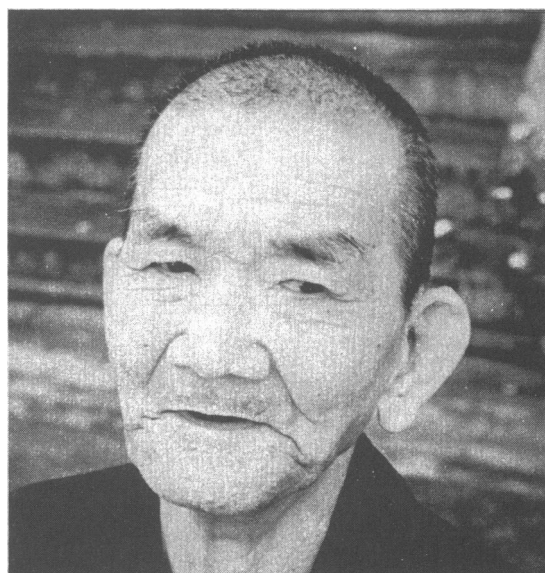


FIG 2—Patient with cauliflower ears

opium beds with hard wooden pillows, common to the opium dens at that time.

Since then the pattern of opiate abuse in Hong Kong has changed. Now fewer than 1% of the current population of addicts smoke opium. The opium dens are no longer in existence and 96% of addicts now use heroin, either by injection, smoking, or fume inhalation.

There are many implications of the changing methods of drug abuse in any society. Probably one such effect will be a decline in the incidence of cauliflower ears among drug addicts in Hong Kong.

- 1 Hong Kong Action Committee Against Narcotics. *Annual report*. 1986:87.
- 2 Flynn E. *My wicked, wicked ways*. London: Pan Books, 1961:136.

