
MDANNIVERSARY

Humane Psychiatrist



An unexpected offshoot of the 18th-century Enlightenment's passionate devotion to the doctrine of the rights of man was that some physicians asked themselves whether the insane were not also entitled to these same rights. ■ The first to put the revolutionary doctrine into practice in France was Philippe Pinel who advocated the humane treatment of the insane and became celebrated by striking the chains from the abject inmates of the Salpêtrière asylum in Paris. His favorite pupil, Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol, carried on the work and became the founder of the most influential school of psychiatry in 19th-century France. ■ **LIFE.** Esquirol was born on February 3, 1772, into one of the most distinguished families of Toulouse, the ancient capital of the Visigoths in the south of France. ■ His father Jean-Baptiste Esquirol lost his title of magistrate in the French Revolution, but his fellow citizens elected him to municipal office under the repub-

DES
MALADIES MENTALES

CONSIDÉRÉES SUIVANT LES RAPPORTS

MÉDICAL, HYGIÉNIQUE ET MÉDICO-LÉGAL,

PAR E. ESQUIROL,

MÉDECIN EN CHEF DE LA MAISON ROYALE DES ALIÉNÉS DE CHARENTON,

ANCIEN INSPECTEUR-GÉNÉRAL DE L'UNIVERSITÉ,

MEMBRE DE L'ACADÉMIE ROYALE DE MÉDECINE, ETC.

ACCOMPAGNÉES DE 27 PLANCHES GRAVÉES.

TOME PREMIER.

PARIS.

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LIBRAIRE DE L'ACADÉMIE ROYALE DE MÉDECINE,

RUE DE L'ÉCOLE DE MÉDECINE, N. 17.

JORDANS, MÊME MAISON, 119, REGENT STREET,

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1838.

Frontispiece is a portrait of Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol in 1838, the year he published *Des maladies mentales*, left. A student of Pinel at the Salpêtrière, right, he became in 1811 its supervising physician of the mental ailments division.



lic, and his foresight as an administrator was credited with sparing his native city from the famine that swept France.

Jean, a frail and puny child, studied at the Collège L'Esquille, then entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice at Issy to prepare for the priesthood in accordance with his parents' wishes. The revolution forced the seminary to close and at 18 Esquirol returned home.

At the Hôpital de la Grave, where his father was an administrator, he began to study medicine. There he saw for the first time how epileptics, prostitutes and the insane were thrown together in the locked and barred wards of the hospitals, while maniacs were confined in dark cells where they were chained to beds of masonry or to walls.

After completing his medical studies in Toulouse he spent two years as a health officer at the Hôpital Le Pelletier in Narbonne. In the year VII of the republic (1800) he went to Paris to seek a livelihood. By accident he discarded an old coat in which his mother had sewn a small sum of money to be kept as a last reserve in a crisis. When he explained this mishap to his parents they distrusted his explanation and refused to send more money. Luckily he met a friend of his seminary days who introduced him to a family who offered him a room and meals. With his basic needs met, he devoted himself to studying medicine and another favorite subject, botany. He frequented the Jardin des Plantes (botanic gardens), attended lectures at the Charité hospital

by the celebrated Jean Corvisart* and visited the Salpêtrière asylum to study mental illnesses.

Esquirol's first meeting with Pinel was the turning point of his career. He became Pinel's favorite pupil, followed him and assisted him in his daily rounds, edited his *Traité de médecine clinique* which appeared in 1802, and prepared under Pinel's direction his own inaugural thesis presented in 1805 under the title *The Passions considered as causes, symptoms, and means of curing mental alienation*.

At that time psychiatry was not represented in the medical faculty, and medical students had no regular instruction in the subject. Pinel was professor of internal medicine, and lectured at the École de médecine on fevers and other internal diseases. The only way of hearing his views on mental illness was to attend his ward rounds.

Shortly before defending his dissertation, Esquirol took his first step in the legal defense of the rights of the mentally ill. He addressed a memorandum to the prefect of police opposing an administrative order requiring that a mentally deranged person must be declared mentally incompetent before he could be admitted to an asylum. The memorandum argued persuasively that such an order could lead to unwarranted decisions of incompetence in cases of temporary delirium, that it would violate a family's right to secrecy under the civil code, and it would pose formidable problems for the judiciary; the prefect of police withdrew the order.

In 1811 Esquirol was appointed supervising physician of the division of mental ailments at the Salpêtrière. During the march on Paris in 1814 of the allied forces campaigning against Napoleon part of

* Later physician to Napoleon.



the asylum was converted into a military hospital under the direction of Esquirol, who was later awarded the ribbon of the Legion of Honor for his devoted services.

In 1817 he presented before the Parisian Academy of Sciences a paper on "Hallucinations among the Insane," a work hailed by his aged master as a contribution of major importance. At that time he also inaugurated the first clinical course in mental illness in the history of medicine. His lectures drew an attentive audience from all parts of France and from abroad. He also conducted a private *maison de santé* where he lived in close association with his patients, limited at first to five or six.

To stimulate the zeal of his pupils he founded in 1818 an annual 200 franc prize and a copy of Pinel's treatise on mania for the best paper on mental illness. A jury of five, chosen from those attending his course, selected as the first laureate Etienne Georget, who became one of Esquirol's outstanding disciples.

REPORT. During the same year he submitted to the minister of the interior a report on his inspection of mental institutions throughout France. It was a moving account of "these unfortunates, who experience the worst human misery, are treated worse than criminals and reduced to a condition worse than that of animals. I have seen them in rags, with only straw to shield them from the cold damp flagstones on which they are stretched out. I have seen them badly nourished, deprived of air to breathe, of water to quench their thirst and of the things most necessary for life. I have seen them turned over to veritable jailers, abandoned to their brutal surveillance. I have seen them chained in the narrowest



Engravings by Ambroise Tardieu from the 1838 edition of *Des maladies mentales* show a patient, top, Esquirol described as suffering from lypemania, a state of morbid depression, and another patient looking disheveled and wild in a restraining garment before treatment but neat and calm after psychiatric treatment.

dirty, infected, airless dark dens, where one would be unwilling to chain the ferocious beasts that are maintained at great expense in the capitals by the extravagance of governments."

The report touched off a general movement for reform, which encouraged Esquirol and his adherents to intensify their efforts to uproot the deeply entrenched view that the insane are incurable. The government established a special committee to improve conditions in asylums, in many of which daily medical rounds and records were introduced for the first time. Esquirol played a leading role in the commission charged in 1821 with converting the abbey of Saint-Yon into an asylum, and he was the guiding force in designing new asylums built at Le Mans, Montpellier, and Marseilles.

He took an active interest in psychiatric developments throughout Europe, inquired about new mental hospitals in Germany and Russia, visited the famous village of Gheel in Belgium, where for centuries mental patients lived in comparative freedom, a practice originating in the popular belief going back to medieval times that the relics of St. Dymphna could cure those possessed of demons. From his observations in Gheel Esquirol drafted proposals for establishing colonies of the mentally ill, and for a system of boarding out nonviolent patients.

In 1825 he left the Salpêtrière to accept the post of medical director of the mental hospital at Charenton, not far from Paris. There he began to prepare with his pupil Guillaume Ferrus, who was appointed inspector general of mental asylums in 1835, a new code to protect the rights of the mentally ill, which became embodied in the famous law of June 30, 1838. It provided for the first time that no one should be involuntarily confined in a mental institution without medical testimony. It placed all mental institutions, public and private, under the supervision of the central government. It regulated the transport, admission and discharge of patients, prohibited mixing mental patients with criminals or housing patients even temporarily in jails.

Esquirol wrote: "The law is a humanitarian law, loudly called for by honest people; it makes an end of the arbitrary measures to which mental patients were subjected. . . . For the first time the law treats mental patients as it does other sick people."

PUBLIC HYGIENE. Besides meeting his heavy responsibilities at Charenton and his intensive preparation of the new legal code, Esquirol served in the 1830s as a member of the council of public hygiene and health of the Seine department, and shared with his nephew Dr. Mitivié the direction of a *maison de santé* he built adjoining his residence in Ivry-sur-Seine, then a charming village on the Seine.



Engraving by Tardieu shows a chained mental patient in Bedlam. Street scene, below, is in Gheel, Belgium, which Esquirol visited and where now as for centuries mental patients live without restraint in comparative freedom.



To strengthen his health, which deteriorated under his heavy work load, Esquirol took a trip to Italy, but he got little rest as he could not resist the temptation to visit asylums and attend lectures. In Turin he accompanied the king of Sardinia on an inspection tour of a newly completed asylum; when he pointed out serious defects in design the king ordered the buildings to be converted into barracks and commanded a new asylum according to Esquirol's plans.

After the law of 1838 was adopted Esquirol planned to found a medical and philosophic library for his pupils at Charenton. Before he could fulfill his dream he died on December 12, 1840, but he left a bequest of 10,000 francs (a huge sum then) toward the establishment of the library.

WRITINGS. Esquirol summed up his clinical and medicolegal experience in *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-legal*. This two-volume work remained a standard psychiatric textbook for decades following its publication in 1838.

Among his other works were pioneer statistic studies on the incidence of mental illness, and 13 contributions to the 60-volume *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, including articles on delirium, dementia, demonomania, erotomania, hallucinations, lypemania, suicide. He contributed to the *Journal de médecine*, the *Revue médicale française et étrangère*, the *Archives générales de médecine*, and founded the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*.

NOSOGRAPHY. In his basic classifications he set

idiocy apart from mental ailments: "Idiocy is not a disease. . . . Idiocy begins with the start of life, or during that period of life which precedes the complete development of intellectual and affective faculties. Idiots reach the point at which they will remain for their whole lifetime. . . . The mental patient has lost something which he previously enjoyed; he is a rich man who has become impoverished. The idiot has always been in a state of misfortune and misery."

Esquirol anticipated the modern concept of depression by differentiating from other psychoses a certain state of morbid depression that he named lypemania. "Lypemaniacs sleep little; anxiety, fear, terror, jealousy, hallucinations keep them awake; if they drop off to sleep, from the moment their eyes are closed they see a thousand phantoms that terrify them; if they sleep, their sleep is broken, agitated by more or less sinister dreams; often they are awakened with a start by a nightmare, by dreams in which they see the objects which have caused or which sustain their delirium."

His concept of monomania, embracing various psychoses showing a predominance of one idea or set of ideas, is equated by some modern interpreters with one form of schizophrenia. He subdivided this category into erotic, reasoning, incendiary, homicidal, suicidal and intoxication monomania. Erotomania was a purely mental ailment, based on a fixed, dominant amorous idea, in contrast to nymphomania and satyriasis, which he regarded as rooted in a physical disorder.

Among homicidal maniacs he distinguished the easily recognizable insane person, motivated by more or less chimeric ideas from those who acted without apparent motive under a blind irresistible impulse, either momentary or sustained.

His concept of monomania, the basis of his defense of criminals whom he characterized as mentally ill, drew sharp criticism to which he replied: "These conclusions may appear strange today; some day, we hope, they will become popular truths. Where is the judge today who would condemn to the bonfire a deranged man or a gypsy accused of magic or sorcery?"

He described dementia as a state of incoherence and irrationality which he regarded as the possible eventual outcome of all other chronic mental ailments. His clinical descriptions of the paralysis that complicates some mental disorders accurately portrayed the phenomena which led to Antoine Bayle's discovery in 1822 of dementia paralytica, syphilitic degeneration of the nervous system.

His pioneer works on psychosensorial disturbance drew a sharp distinction between hallucinations and





Garden at the mental hospital at Charenton where in 1825 Esquirol became the medical director. Leading disciple of Pinel, his own influence was so great that by the middle of the 19th century almost all French psychiatrists were students of either Pinel or Esquirol.

illusions. Hallucinations frequently but not invariably associated with delirium were psychic phenomena independent of all sensory impressions, like dreams without the presence of an external object; illusions were false perceptions of sensory impressions, like mistaking a windmill for a man. Esquirol held that in the course of a mental illness a "salutary crisis" often marked the turning point toward recovery, but he strongly opposed shock treatment or the massive bleeding widely practiced in his day.

He was the leader of a brilliant school which included Guillaume Ferrus, who organized a farm at Sainte-Anne Hospital to enable patients to work in the open; Etienne Georget, who did outstanding work on hebephrenia, and François Leuret, whose *Psychological Fragments on Insanity* (1834) later served as important source material for Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet.

PERSONALITY. During his stay as a young man in Narbonne, out of curiosity he attended the proceedings of a revolutionary tribunal. Shocked by the ineptitude of an advocate defending an accused person, he impetuously cried out: "I would know better how to defend an innocent person." Implored by the defendant's wife to intercede, with the judges' permission he approached the bar, made an impassioned plea and won an acquittal.

A monarchist himself, at a later period in his life under the restoration of the Bourbons, while on an official visit of inspection in Montpellier, he defended with no less zeal a professor who had been

dismissed on charges of inspiring revolutionary principles in his pupils; owing to his intervention the professor regained his post.

His pupil François Leuret wrote that Esquirol "never engaged in intrigue nor participated in a cabal, never displayed jealous rivalry, never suffered inner agony when a competitor won out over him. He has seen enemies on occasion attack him relentlessly, and he has forgiven them. He has seen pupils whom he has loved turn against him, and he has not loved them the less."

It was a well-known tenet of Esquirol that it was impossible to imitate exactly an epileptic attack. One morning while he was making his rounds in the hospital, one of his pupils, Louis Calmeil, suddenly cried out and fell, wracked by convulsions. Esquirol carefully examined him, then remarked: "The poor fellow is an epileptic." Calmeil promptly sprang to his feet and asked his teacher whether he was ready to change his opinion about the possibility of simulating an epileptic attack; Esquirol took the incident in characteristic good humor.

He suffered most from the slights of some patients who turned away on meeting him after he had cured them. He said philosophically: "Fatal profession; people make it a point of pride not to know me; above all those whose secrets I possess treat me as a pariah, and shake my hand only in the shadows or behind closed doors."

SUMMING UP. Champion of the rights of mentally ill man.

