

Letter to the editor

Dear Professor Steck,

In your paper “Milestones in the development of neurology and psychiatry in Europe” (Schweizer Arch Neurol Psych 2010;161:85) you have appropriately quoted Manfred Sakel for the discovery of insulin shock therapy. You also state that insulin shock has been replaced, among other methods, by electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). However, the contribution of Ugo Cerletti, whose research prompted the discovery and the application of this treatment, was omitted.

Ugo Cerletti was an outstanding personality. Born in Conegliano in 1877, near Treviso, where his father organised the local school of oenology (the first in Italy), he took his medical degree in 1901 in Rome, working with Giovanni Mingazzini and Ezio Sciamanna. He subsequently attended Pierre Marie in Paris and Emil Kraepelin, Alois Alzheimer and Franz Nissl in Heidelberg. After his service in the army, he held the laboratory of the psychiatric hospital of Mombello, near Milan. In 1925, he obtained the chair of neuropsychiatry at the University of Bari, moving subsequently to the University of Genoa to replace the famous psychiatrist Enrico Morselli. In 1935, he was called to the Sapienza University of Rome.

The research leading to the discovery of ECT was prompted by his observations at the slaughterhouse of Rome, where pigs were suppressed during post-convulsive coma after application of electric current to the head. Provided it did not cross the heart, the current did not kill the animal but was used to provoke convulsions, as a rudimentary method of anaesthesia. Ugo Cerletti produced convulsions in dogs, with no negative consequences. Knowing the studies of Manfred Sakel and convinced of an antagonism between schizophrenia and epilepsy, he decided to apply the current to the human brain. The first ECT was

performed in April 1938, with the cooperation of Lucio Bini and Ferdinando Accornero, on a patient with schizophrenia found wandering in the railway station and admitted to the emergency department of the neuropsychiatric institute.

ECT was rapidly and extensively applied to all kinds of mental disturbance, and proved its efficacy in affective disorders. For more than ten years, until chlorpromazine and imipramine opened the way to psychopharmacology, ECT remained “the” treatment for mental diseases, relieving the grief of depression in a long series of patients all over the world. It still proves useful in severe depression with risk of suicide and in pharmaco-resistant depression. Underservedly, “stop ECT” has become a battle cry of greens and antipsychiatrists.

Ugo Cerletti was a fertile brain. In 1915, on the Austrian alpine front under the fire of Kaiserjaegers, the commissioned officer, Doctor Cerletti, convinced headquarters to adopt a white camouflage overall for soldiers fighting in the snow. It was a première. A few years later, as Europe remained at war, he patented a delayed action fuse for artillery shells, not a laudable enterprise for a doctor but one that raised, after a demonstration to an inter-allied commission, the immediate interests of the French and British armies, who were conducting similar experiments. This device perhaps cost him the Nobel Prize, for which he was repeatedly a candidate. In the last years of his life, convinced of the biochemical origin of mental diseases, he observed the progress of psychopharmacology with great interest and an open mind.

Ugo Cerletti died in Rome in 1963.

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