

## "DRAGONS IN THE NOSE"

### AN INVESTIGATION OF TISSUES REMOVED FROM THE NOSE BY UNQUALIFIED PERSONS IN SINGAPORE

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There is a current belief among some of the people of Singapore, especially among certain sections of the Chinese population, that it is better to consult a *sinseh* rather than a qualified medical practitioner when one is suffering from nasal obstruction or discharges from the nose. There are several *sinsehs* (practitioners of Chinese medicine) in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, who would diagnose, "dragons in the nose" for these complaints and proceed to remove small, oval, whitish and occasionally blood-stained pieces of tissue from each nostril. The qualified medical practitioner, who has been unable to diagnose anything more esoteric than vasomotor rhinitis or allergic rhinitis, has long suspected that these operations were sleight-of-hand tricks and that the success of the *sinseh* was attributable to the gullibility of the patients and the known tendency for these symptoms to be relieved by a variety of agents, or even to regress spontaneously. However, these cases have not been carefully investigated and the nature of the tissues removed has not been recorded previously.

The present report is based on a pathological investigation of tissues removed by *sinsehs* from four cases—two pieces of tissue, one from each nostril, were "removed" from each case and one case was operated twice; consequently ten specimens were available for study. This investigation has established the fraudulent nature of the operations.

#### CASE REPORTS

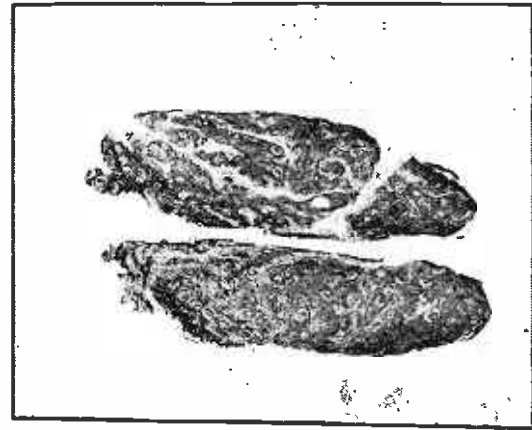
**Case I.** Mr. T. had suffered from recurrent attacks of nasal obstruction for several years and, after several medical practitioners had been unable to discover the cause for his complaint, consulted a *sinseh* who removed two oval, whitish pieces of tissue (dragons), one from each nostril. His symptoms cleared soon after the operation and he was so satisfied with his improvement that his friends soon heard of the skill and competence of the *sinseh* in removing lesions which the doctors in the hospital had been unable to detect with the help of all their instruments. The tissues, which Mr. T. had kept preserved in spirit, were made available to me through a mutual friend.

Histological examination (B57796/58) showed that the tissues had the structure of lymph nodes with no trace of any nasopharyngeal epithelium (Fig. 1). As such a structure has never been encountered in nasopharyngeal biopsies in our department, which has records of several hundreds of these examinations, it was concluded that the tissues were extraneous; the possibility of animal origin was strongly suspected in view of some structural variations from human lymph nodes and the presence of a large number of eosinophils whose nuclei were small and round rather than lobulated, and which contained fewer and coarser granules.

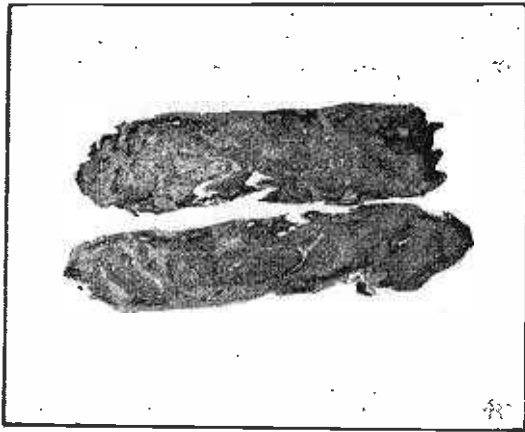
**Case II.** Mr. C., a University graduate, had suffered from vasomotor rhinitis for some months and, being rather disappointed with the results of treatment at the General Hospital, consulted a *sinseh* who removed two pieces of tissue, one from each nostril. Mr. C. experienced considerable relief from his symptoms, and presented the tissues to the E.N.T. Surgeon at the hospital who had not found any such lesions in a careful examination. Histological examination revealed lymph nodes which were closely similar structurally to those in Case I (B3144/59).

**Case III.** Mr. N., a merchant, had a long history of sinusitis with frequent attacks of running nose and nasal obstruction for which he had been treated by several specialists both in hospital and in private practice. He consulted a *sinseh* who removed two "dragons", one from each nose, which he duly displayed to his doctor, volunteering the information that he had had four sets of "dragons" removed by the same *sinseh* during the past three years. He had experienced dramatic relief from his symptoms on each occasion but the symptoms had recurred within a few months. In the family history, there was a brother who suffered from similar complaints which were likewise relieved by the removal of "dragons" from the nose, two at a time, by the same *sinseh*.

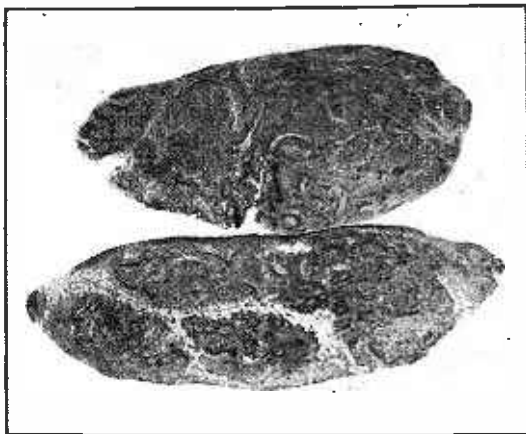
The practitioner sent these specimens to me for histological examination (B6505/59) and the experience of the previous cases enabled me to



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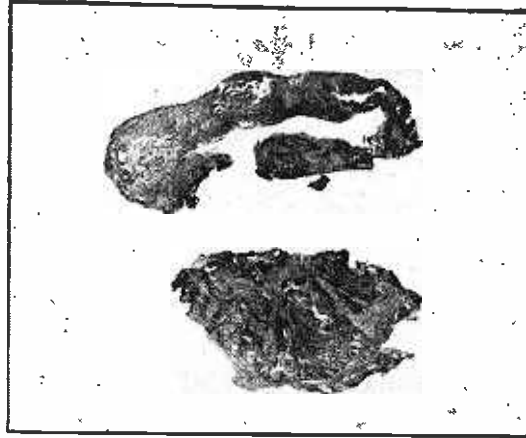
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Fig. 1. Photographs of sections from five biopsy specimens, each showing two pieces of lymphoid tissue of closely similar appearance (Magnification X 5).

report that the tissues were lymph nodes of extraneous origin and that they were probably "removed" by a *sinseh* and not by the practitioner himself — information which the practitioner had failed to provide in his letter. Mr. N. was requested to bring the tissues fresh and to avoid fixation in spirit, should he ever undergo the operation again, to enable a more accurate diagnosis of his troubles. He did this six months later and the practitioner who examined him shortly after the operation noticed fresh bleeding from the nostrils. The tissues were examined by the precipitin technique at the Department of Chemistry by Dr. Lee Kum Tatt, who reported a positive reaction with anti-pig serum (Lab. No. 4148/60). Histological examination showed lymph nodes whose structure was similar to those seen in the previous cases (B4670/60); sections of pig lymph nodes obtained at a local market likewise showed a similar histological appearance.

Case IV. Mr. A., a salesman, was told by his doctor that he was suffering from hay fever but his neighbours were sure that he was a clear case of "dragon in the nose" and advised him to consult a *sinseh*. Mr. A., however, was somewhat sceptical of this operation and arranged for his wife to accompany him and to watch carefully over the movements of the *sinseh*. The operation was preceded by the insufflation of a white powder into the nose, and was over so quickly, with Mr. A. hardly feeling a thing, that neither he nor his wife were able to appreciate what had happened. The *sinseh* gave him two pieces of tissue which he claimed to have removed and Mr. A., who had experienced great relief from his symptoms, gave them to his doctor who made them available for histopathological study. The histological structure was similar to those in the preceding cases (B8182/60) and Mr. A. suffered a return of all his old symptoms soon after he understood that he had been the victim of some sharp practice.

#### COMMENT

The treatment of "dragons in the nose" represents a fraud that had been practised frequently by some unqualified persons (*sinsehs*). It is exceptional for tissues removed by *sinsehs* to be available for histopathological study and the few cases reported here are but the result of the interest of a few doctors to investigate an unusual phenomenon in patients who had concurrently sought help from the practitioners of Western Medicine. The fraudulent nature of those operations has not been generally recognised and gullible patients continue to pay approximately \$50.00-\$100.00 for each operation. The combined use

of histological and precipitin techniques in this investigation may interest the medical criminologist, as may also the observation that the *sinseh* invariably removed two identical pieces of tissue, one from each nostril — a suspicious circumstance which in itself rendered the possibility of a natural disease process most unlikely. It is hoped that this report may be useful to histopathologists who may be called upon, as I was in Case III, to examine the tissues without knowledge of the circumstances of their removal. It would be most difficult to make a correct diagnosis in such cases without knowledge of this phenomenon.

The origin of the term "dragon in the nose" appears to be obscure as it is interesting and I include here the comments of Dr. Ho Peng Yoke and Dr. Gwee Ah Leng.

Dr. Ho reports as follows:— "I have tried in vain looking for the term "nose dragon" (*pi lung* 鼻龍) in several Chinese and Japanese dictionaries, encyclopedias as well as mediaeval medical books. I shall therefore try to suggest some possible explanations of this term. The Chinese medical term for nasal catarrh is given in most mediaeval medical texts as *weng*, or *pi weng* (鼻翳). A less frequently used term is *nung*, or *pi nung* (鼻膿), found as early as in the 6th century book *Yu P'ien* (玉篇), and referring both to blocked nose and discharge from the nose. It seems quite possible that the term *pi lung* "nose dragon" is a corrupted form of the earlier *pi nung* or perhaps a homonym, which the Chinese is particularly fond of. *Pi* refers to the nose and *lung* means dragon and also to blockade; a dragon may be used to denote something long — that coming out from a running nose. Hence the term *pi lung* for nasal catarrh. I suspect that this term is employed or even devised by the southern Chinese although I cannot substantiate this. It might be interesting to mention that a term "nose snake" *pi she* (鼻蛇) for nasal polypus is given in a modern dictionary (Mathews)".

Dr. Gwee made the following report:— "Nasal speciality is usually practised by the less respectable practitioners, namely externalists (外科), who are usually not well educated, and who learn their trade through direct instruction as apprentices. It appears probable that a corruption of terms has occurred through ignorance and mistake in words (白字), such as from 膿 to 龍 (*nung*—*lung*). On the other hand, Chinese are very much addicted to the use of euphemistic terms, and a lot of play on homonyms has been employed to this end, such as 蝠 (bat) for 福 (fortune), and 鹿 (deer) for 祿 (official employ-

ment), and it is not unlikely that the transition here from 驪 to 龍 is of the same category. The actual employment of this term, however, appears in the advertisement of certain local unregistered practitioners and the source of corruption, if one may judge by the sound, appears to be northern, as in southern dialects the two sounds would be much less close and hence less likely to be corrupted. There are several books on nose and throat disorders listed in Medical Literature catalogue (醫藏), and it may be a search in those books would help, but I strongly suspect that this is an euphemistic corruption of recent origin, and hence scrutiny of the period between late Ching and now should be most profitable".

#### SUMMARY

- (1). Some nasal and nasopharyngeal symptoms are attributed to "dragons in the nose"

by certain sections of the people of Singapore.

- (2). Some sinsehs have exploited this belief by claiming to remove pieces of the tissue from the patients' nostrils.
- (3). It is shown that the operation is a fraud and that the tissue are lymph nodes of the pig "removed" from the nose by sleight of hand.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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