

Medicine in Stamps

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): father of psychoanalysis

Tan S Y, MD, JD and Takeyesu A*

Director of Medical Education, Hawaii Medical Centre East, Honolulu, Hawaii

* Research done as a first year student, John A Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii.

“**A** man who has been the indisputable favourite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success.”

– Sigmund Freud

Think Oedipus complex, infantile sexuality and repression, and Sigmund Freud gets immediate credit for these revolutionary explanations of man's erratic and sometimes pathological behaviour. Freud was a 19th century genius, a clinical scientist who discovered the art and science of psychoanalysis. More than a doctor of medicine, Freud was a doctor of modernity. Yet he has been called modern history's most debunked doctor, his authenticity questioned, and his legacy of psychoanalysis relegated to an 'imposture'. Alas, with the recent ascent of the chemical theory of mental disease and discovery of powerful medications, much of Freudianism and its talk therapy have faded.

EARLY YEARS Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856 in Freiberg, Moravia (part of the Czech Republic today) to Jacob Freud, a wool merchant and Amalia Nathanson, an adoring and attentive mother. The family moved to Vienna when he was three. Freud's precocious nature gained him the status of favourite child; his doting mother often addressing him as “my golden Siggie”. He enjoyed a private room whereas his five siblings had to share living quarters, and when Siggie once complained that his sister's piano playing had become disruptive, his mother promptly had it removed.

Freud excelled academically, graduating from high school with honours, and then enrolled in the University of Vienna. Initially interested in zoology, he spent countless hours dissecting eels in search of testes, giving up only after he had studied over 400 specimens. It is speculated that this early focus on genitalia may have influenced Freud's eventual theories on human sexuality and social behaviour. During 1876–1882, Freud worked

under the tutelage of Jacob Brücke, a physiologist who taught him to view the living organism as a dynamic system to which basic laws of science could be applied. Freud completed his medical studies in 1881 and first took a clinical position at the Vienna General Hospital. In 1885, he journeyed to France to broaden his experience by working with the eminent neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot. There, he learnt the famed technique of hypnosis therapy. However, unlike Charcot, Freud was disenchanted by the poor therapeutic outcomes, and soon began considering other methods of treatment.

PSYCHOANALYSIS During the 1890s, Josef Breuer, a respected physician, began treating a complex patient, ‘Anna O’, who suffered from hysteria. Perplexed by Anna's bizarre symptoms (mental lapses, hallucinations about black snakes, skulls and skeletons, partial paralysis and hydrophobia), Breuer asked Freud for help in exploring their potential causes. After years of daily observations, both clinicians finally concluded that Anna's symptoms were “residues of sexual feelings and impulses

she had felt obliged to suppress, and that reconciliation of such feelings happened only when she spoke freely, uninhibited”. The opportunity to verbalise released the hidden subconscious that was at the root of her mental disturbance. With the publication of *Studies on Hysteria*, the ‘cathartic talking cure’ drew excited attention, and in 1896, Freud coined the term ‘psychoanalysis’ for this treatment method. At the heart of his revolutionary approach to mental illness was his concept of repression, the denial by the conscious mind of deep-rooted feelings and motivations, frequently sexual in nature.

While working with Breuer, Freud began a passionate period of self-analysis with an emphasis on his own childhood. He was apparently insecure as a young man and looked upon his colleagues Brücke, Charcot and Breuer as father surrogates. In correspondence with



his close friend Wilhelm Fliess, Freud confided that “*the most important patient for me was my own person*”. Indeed, much of what we know about Freud has come from his communications with Fliess, a confidante and in many ways, his personal psychoanalyst, and from some 2,300 family letters and 1,500 love letters, well captured in a three-volume biography by Ernest Jones, a fellow psychoanalyst and aficionado. Freud admitted that he had a childhood infatuation with his mother and harboured a hatred for his father, the primary rival for her affection. These self observations were pivotal in the development of his famous Oedipus complex theory, and formed the basis of his profound work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900. This work defined dreams in terms of emotions that were critical as portals to the unconscious mind.

GENIUS Freud was not the first, and others had preceded him, in touting psychotherapy. For example, Reil in 1803 suggested its role in treating mental illness, Moreau de Tours recognised the hidden meanings of dreams, Carus emphasised the role of the unconscious in explaining normal and aberrant behaviour, and Herbart had even used the term repression. Yet, it was left to Freud with his keen observations and prolonged study of individual patients to firmly establish the discipline of psychotherapy. His training in biology, physiology and neurology prompted him to place science before philosophy, observations before theory, and thus brought credibility to his ideas. They were as broad as they were bold. The list includes transference, repression, id, ego and superego, ambivalence, infantile sexualism, Oedipus complex, dreams and the omnipresent Freudian slip. According to Freud, they were all amenable to elucidation with psychoanalysis. His work won him Germany’s prestigious Goethe Prize and an honorary degree from Clark University. He formed the Psychoanalytic Society, although the inevitable falling out among colleagues led to the departure of peers like Alfred Adler and Carl Jung. In 1902, he became a professor at the University of Vienna.

Freud’s lesser known contributions included his observations that certain undifferentiated cells (grey matter) were the origin of sensory root fibres, and this set the groundwork for his description of the structure and function of the medulla oblongata. He introduced the use of gold chloride to stain nerve tissues. His mission to explore what he called “*the psychopathology of everyday life*” led to a prolific volume of work placing Freudianism within a larger cultural context. For example, his analytical essay on the depiction of Moses by Michelangelo is considered ground-breaking in art history circles, while his famous publication *Civilization and its Discontents* continues to be a pillar in anthropologic studies.

For all his genius, Freud sported palpable weaknesses. He tended to overgeneralise, insisting that all dreams had hidden meanings and the Oedipus complex, a universal phenomenon. Like Paracelsus, his boldness in challenging entrenched dogma was coloured by overconfidence, even arrogance. And like many medical pioneers, including the famed surgeon William Halsted, Freud was attracted to mind-altering drugs. Plagued with addictions, Freud was an early proponent of cocaine as a panacea for pain, prescribing the drug liberally to patients and using it himself. He smoked heavily, and although his use of cocaine eventually tapered, his passion for cigars never waned. In typical erotic terms, he described smoking as “*ultimately a substitute for that prototype of all addictions, masturbation*”.

DEATH In later life, Freud developed cancer of the jaw and palate. He would undergo some thirty operations over a span of sixteen years, and was reduced to wearing a hideous, denture-like prosthesis to keep his oral and nasal cavities separate, which prevented him from eating and speaking normally. In 1933, the political climate of Vienna ushered in a wave of anti-Semitism, and the Nazi party destroyed all of Freud’s works, burning them in the city streets. Freud was lucky enough to flee with his wife to England in 1938. Before long, suffering from bouts of paralysing pain following several major surgeries, Freud would take his physician’s hand and say: “*Schur, you remember our contract not to leave me in the lurch when the time had come. Now it is nothing but torture and makes no sense*”. With the reluctant consent of Anna, Freud’s devoted youngest daughter, Dr Schur then administered three doses of morphine, the last causing Freud to lapse into a coma. Death came at three in the morning of September 23, 1939.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander FG, Selesnick ST. *The History of Psychiatry*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Galbis-Reig D. Sigmund Freud, MD: Forgotten contributions to neurology, neuropathology, and anesthesia. *Internet J Neurology* 2004; Vol 3: No. 1.
- Gay P. *Freud: A Life for Our Time*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Obituary: Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). *Am J Sociol* 1939; 45:453.
- Simmons JG. *Doctors and Discoveries: Sigmund Freud. The Rise, Decline, and Persistence of Psychoanalysis*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002: 173-8.
- Tan SY, Yeow ME. Paracelsus (1493–1541): The man who dared. *Singapore Med J* 2003; 44:5-7.
- Tan SY, Shigaki D. Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893): Pathologist who shaped modern neurology. *Singapore Med J* 2007; 48:383-4.
- Tan SY, Uyehara P. William Stewart Halsted (1852–1922): father of American surgery. *Singapore Med J* 2010; 51:530-1.
- Thorton SP. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Sigmund Freud*. Available at: www.iep.utm.edu/f/freud.htm. Accessed 2008.