

INSUFFICIENT SLEEP AND THE DANCING PLAGUE OF 1518 (PART I)

By Reg Hackshaw, EDD

She had danced into the danger zone
When the dancer becomes the dance.
– Flashdance, 1983¹

Dance marathons captivated popular attention in the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s.² These events were examples of competitive sleep deprivation. Contestants, who remained in nearly continuous motion for hundreds or even thousands of hours on the dance floor by forcibly delaying sleep onset, exhibited symptoms of behaviorally induced insufficient sleep syndrome (ISS).³ Reporters from local dailies who followed these contestants documented irresistible sleep attacks, physical exhaustion and episodes of delusional ideation due to severely restricted rest breaks.⁴

MOVING IN RHYTHM

Written records describing the behavioral effects of prolonged, restless dancing actually predate reports of these grueling spectacles of the early twentieth century. Community dancing emerged about 40,000 years ago as a way to strengthen social bonds among pre-historic humans traveling in hunter-gathering societies.⁵ Ancient sculptures survive portraying people seemingly engaged in coordinated, rhythmic movements.⁶ However, detailed accounts of prolonged community dancing surface later in medieval records from Western Europe.⁷ Contemporaneous, eye-witness accounts are significant because they provide glimpses into how symptoms of insufficient sleep from extended periods of strenuous, physical activity were chronicled in the medieval era.

TROUBLE IN RIVER CITY

The remarkable dancing plague of Strasbourg is one of the most documented examples of communal choreomania or manic dancing by local residents.⁷⁻⁹ By the late medieval era, Strasbourg had evolved into a busy trading center on the Rhine River in the northeastern region of France according to Michigan State University professor, John Waller. Patient zero of the plague was



Fig 1. Engraving by Henricus Hondius II (1573-1610) showing three victims of communal choreomania being restrained by neighbors; in the background, a dancer is sitting near a tree apparently resting. Reproduced from Waller.⁹

identified as Frau Troffea. Although her solo debut in mid-July of 1518 may have been regarded by passersby as a mild curiosity or perhaps a spontaneous, personal expression; one week later, she was joined by an ensemble cast of 34 neighborhood residents who seemed compelled to follow her lead.

An isolated, choreomaniac outbreak on a narrow city street became a full-on epidemic by the end of August when “400 people... experienced the madness, dancing wildly, uncontrollably around the city.”⁸ Reportedly, the plague led to as many as 15 fatalities per day due to exhaustion associated with a lack of adequate rest as well as dehydration from the scorching, mid-summer heat.⁹ Bewildered civic leaders consulted with local physicians hoping that they could calm the crowd before a dance fever pandemic plunged the river city into chaos and pandemonium ruled the streets.

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CHILLING REMEDIES

Medieval views concerning sleeping and waking behavior were informed by ideas rooted in antiquity. Nearly 2,500 years ago, sleep onset was associated with the cooling of the blood.¹⁰ The Classical physician, Hippocrates wrote “when sleep comes upon the body the blood is chilled.” Galen, a Roman-era physician, claimed that a “short sleep which appears sufficient without being really deep” when the cooling nature of the breath interacted with the blood.¹¹⁻¹² Typically, the Hippocratic and Galenic diagnostic approaches evaluated the presenting symptoms, weather conditions, diet and occasionally dreams.¹³

Strasbourg’s physicians concurred that the footloose frenzy was related to “hot” summer blood that could “overheat the brain causing anger, rashness and madness.”⁸ However, local officials refused to provide a remedy of soothing refreshments to chill those brains presumably operating in overdrive and facilitate sleep onset among the dancers. Their solution was to work the crowd to the point of physical exhaustion by relocating them to an open-air performance space; hired musicians kept the entranced dancers moving to the hypnotic rhythm of drums and tambourines.⁸

To Be Continued...

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