

# Franz Mesmer: pioneer in the treatment of functional disease or charlatan?

This year commemorates the 200th anniversary of the death of Franz Anton Mesmer. He is regarded by many as one of the originators of effective treatment of functional mental disorders and by others as nothing more than one of a multitude of highly effective quacks. His name is perpetuated today in the term 'mesmerism', defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as '... hypnotic state induced in a person by the exercise of another's will power'. As you might well conjecture, he had a colourful personality and an equally colourful career.

Mesmer was born in May 1734 at Iznang, on the shores of Lake Constance in what was then Swabia, now part of Germany. His father was a head forester.

Mesmer went to a Jesuit college, then studied medicine in Vienna, commencing in 1759 and qualified Doctor of Medicine in 1766. His graduation thesis was entitled 'On the influence of the planets on the human body'. This was based heavily on the work of the English physician, Richard Mead although, to give Mesmer his due, graduation theses at that time were seldom expected to contain much original material. This study dealt with the effects of the gravitational forces of the moon and the planets on invisible fluid within the human body and how this, in turn, would control the health of the subject.

Mesmer then modified this concept of gravitation to one of animal magnetism; invisible fluid in the human body could be acted upon and controlled by the laws of magnetism. The body could be stimulated by any magnetised object and this stimulation, in turn, could be manipulated by a trained person. Illness was the result of obstruction to the flow of this fluid but the obstruction could be broken down by 'crises', trance-like states, often ending in delirium or convulsions.

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In 1768 Mesmer married a wealthy widow and set himself up in practice as a physician in a fashionable part of Vienna. Here he devised various techniques to achieve harmonious fluid flow. Initially, this involved giving the patient an iron-containing preparation which was followed by the application of magnets to various parts of the body. Soon he gave up the use of magnets and replaced these by movements of the hands, which he considered to contribute animal magnetism from himself to the patient, who would report feeling streams of fluid passing through his or her body.

In 1778, Mesmer moved to Paris. This followed something of a scandal after he had failed to cure the blindness of a well-known young female musician. In Paris he set up an elaborate practice in the wealthy part of town. When treating an individual patient, Mesmer would sit facing the subject, knees touching knees, holding the subject's hands and staring into his/her eyes; this might last for hours. Patients might have convulsions during such sessions, which were regarded as a sign of a 'cure'.

Within a couple of years, Mesmer's practice was so extensive that he commenced treatment 'en masse'. A large shallow bath was placed in the centre of the room, large enough for 20 patients to sit around. The lid over the bath was pierced with holes, corresponding to the number of patients. Into each hole was placed an iron rod, which was bent to a right angle at a height corresponding to the site of each patient's complaint and pointing towards him or her, and a rope connected the bath to each of the patients.

Mesmer himself motioned with his hands and his eyes without touching the patients, who often underwent convulsions during the course of the session. These convulsions were regarded as a good sign and evidence of a likely cure of the condition. Mesmer's reputation and his practice flourished and he obviously became a wealthy man.

In 1784, the Emperor Louis XVI decided that the time had come to investigate Mesmer and his apparent 'miraculous' cures brought about by animal magnetism. The commission was a powerful one and included Antoine Lavoisier, the distinguished chemist, Benjamin Franklin, at that time the American Ambassador, and himself a well-known scientist, and the physician Joseph Guillotin, the inventor of a 'humane' form of execution. They concluded that there was no mysterious 'fluid' and any benefit resulting from the treatment was caused by the subject's imagination.

The following year, Mesmer left Paris and his activities in his remaining years are obscure. He died 200 years ago, in 1815, at the age of 80 years in Meersburg, Germany, where he lies buried.

So what is Mesmer's place in history? However much we may smile at his ridiculous theory of animal magnetism, there is no doubt that Mesmer had a remarkable influence over many of his patients who we would regard as probably suffering from a variety of neuroses. Today the hypnotic state is well recognized (hypnosis, derived from the Greek word 'to put to sleep', soon replaced the older term).

That great French neurologist, Jean Martin Charcot (1825–93), at the Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris, made an extensive study of hypnosis in his practice, especially in the treatment of hysterical paralysis. Today, hypnotherapy is used in many fields of medical practice, including the treatment of stress, addiction (especially smoking), sleep disorders and childbirth. It has been used in trials of inducing surgical anaesthesia, although it is time-consuming and only effective in a proportion of patients. Could it be the basis of the documented operations performed in China under acupuncture?

Two hundred years after his death there is still much to interest us in the life and work of Franz Mesmer. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*