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Editorial

The legacy of Karl-Axel Ekbom

The year 2005 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of Karl-Axel Ekbom's thesis *Restless Legs—a Clinical Study of a Hitherto Overlooked Disease* [1].

Professor Ekbom was the neurologist and scientist who aptly coined the eponym 'restless legs'. His extensive work on this problem is still considered the most comprehensive and substantial contribution to the field of restless legs syndrome (RLS). He made additional contributions to the literature on RLS for several years, until his death in 1977. As all those interested in this topic have noted, Ekbom's data are always quoted in the modern literature on RLS.

It was a great privilege for me personally to have been a medical student in Professor Ekbom's neurological department at Uppsala University Hospital in 1970. Karl-Axel Ekbom was a humble and kind person who took great care with his medical students. He had an excellent reputation in Sweden as a most skilled neurologist; it must be remembered that he was living and working in the period long before modern diagnostic techniques such as CT and MRI of the nervous system.

A contemporary of Ekbom at Uppsala during that period was Nils Brage Nordlander, the first to study the efficacy of intravenous iron for RLS [2]. Although both Ekbom and Nordlander frequently lectured on RLS, we rarely saw patients with RLS outside the university milieu. However, Ekbom's classic description of RLS symptoms rings true even today [1]:

"The patient's sleep may be disturbed night after night for years."

"In its most severe form it causes great suffering."

"The disease is so common that every practicing physician meets it."

"After one's attention has been drawn to it, it is generally easy to diagnose."

According to the article by Hening and collaborators [3], published in this issue of *Sleep Medicine*, not very much has happened since 1945. Their report, though an important contribution to the literature, focuses on the fact that physicians remain remarkably unaware of the clinical manifestations of RLS and that RLS patients are inappropriately treated. The American patient organization Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, Inc. has taken account of this, and often reminds us that RLS is 'the most common disorder you have never heard of'. Unfortunately, people seeking

medical attention, as well as those employed in the healthcare sector, have little or no knowledge of RLS.

How can this be? Part of the explanation may be that leg restlessness is bearable to the extent that the afflicted person does not bother to seek medical advice, and those who do may often find it difficult to give explicit information about their symptoms. Restless legs has often been considered a harmless symptom; knowledge of its consequences to health in general has not been available because medical students at university hospitals are primarily taught about diseases resulting in life threatening impairments of bodily functions. It is also clear that, until recently, there was no accepted treatment for the condition available to those doctors who might have heard about it. However, studies showing a neuropathological origin for the disorder, along with the development of effective treatment for RLS, have dramatically changed this situation [4–8].

The article by Hening et al. also stresses that RLS disturbs sleep, and the progress in sleep research during the last 10–20 years has directed our significant attention to this important fact. The formation of the International RLS Study Group (IRLSSG) and the publication of the definition of RLS in 1995 also made it easier to inform and communicate about RLS [9].

The subtitle of Ekbom's thesis from 1945, 'A hitherto overlooked disease' continues to be a reality today. The situation we face, that there is still a great unawareness among physicians about RLS, is a future challenge for researchers and people working in the healthcare sector. Thus, for physicians and researchers committed to search for the etiology and treatment of RLS, an equally important function will be to inform both health workers and the public about this 'common disease, met by every practicing physician, which may cause great suffering and is generally easy to diagnose'.

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