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A Historical Analysis of the Original Descriptions of Spasmodic Dysphonia (Laryngeal Dystonia)

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In 1871, Ludwig Traube, an Austrian Pulmonary Physician, described a single case of “Spastic dysphonia” which has become the primary citation for SD. This is considered alongside earlier cases of the London Laryngologist Morell Mackenzie to illuminate diagnostic features.

Traube’s case has been located and translated. Mackenzie’s eight cases of “Spasm of the tensors of the vocal cords” are compared to this.

Although secondary citations in contemporary publications credit Traube for establishing the clinical entity SD, his reported case does not conform to currently accepted diagnostic features. Notably his patient’s voice recovered very rapidly, suggesting a psychogenic aetiology. In contrast, Mackenzie’s descriptions of voice features and clinical signs on indirect mirror laryngoscopy are entirely consistent with a diagnosis of SD. Moreover, several innovative treatment techniques described by Mackenzie have some scientific foundation in the light of our contemporary understanding of the deranged neuro-muscular activity in SD.

Sometimes secondary citations in medical literature lead to the inadvertent perpetuation of factual misrepresentation. Mackenzie should be credited with the first description of SD. His observations were remarkable considering the rudimentary instrumentation available for assessing dynamic laryngeal movement disorders. Traube L. (1871) Spastische Form der nervösen Heiserkeit. *Gesammelte Beitr Pathol Physiol.*2:677. Mackenzie, M. (1868). Hoarseness, loss of voice and stridulous breathing in relation to nervo-muscular affections of the larynx. London: John Churchill & Sons.