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Freud and the Turbinectomy

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In 1895, Freud enlisted the famous rhinologist Fliess to perform a turbinectomy on Emma Eckstein, a Viennese socialite. The indication? Dysmenorrhoea and abdominal pain – caused by “hysteria”. Miss Eckstein suffered a near-fatal haemorrhage and permanent disfiguration, so why did Freud maintain an unshaken faith in sinus surgery as a treatment for hysteria?

We explore the established but often under acknowledged associations between rhinosinusitis and the psyche. These hypotheses prevailed until the 1940s, and we contrast them with modern evidence on the aetiology of rhinitis symptoms particular to female physiology.

At the time of Freud’s disastrous dalliance with rhinology, the medical profession was convinced the nose, the psyche and menstruation were intrinsically linked. Ladies with epistaxis were diagnosed with “vicarious nasal menstruation” and cocaine was liberally applied to cure hysteria; turbinectomy was a solution for all manner of ills. Bereavement, marital strife and even discovering oneself to be allergic to chocolate were seen as predispositions to rhinitis. The advent of immunology and bacteriology has enabled a more evidence-based approach to rhinology – however it is interesting to note that hormonal changes have been found to affect nasal mucosa, and symptoms of allergic rhinitis are significantly more common in female patients with high levels of anxiety.

Although hormonal changes, anxiety and depression may be female-specific factors in rhinosinusitis, poor understanding of the pathophysiology lead to questionable, and sometimes dangerous management by Freud and his followers. Miss Eckstein’s sad story made us wonder how many disease processes labelled as non-organic are merely poorly understood.