

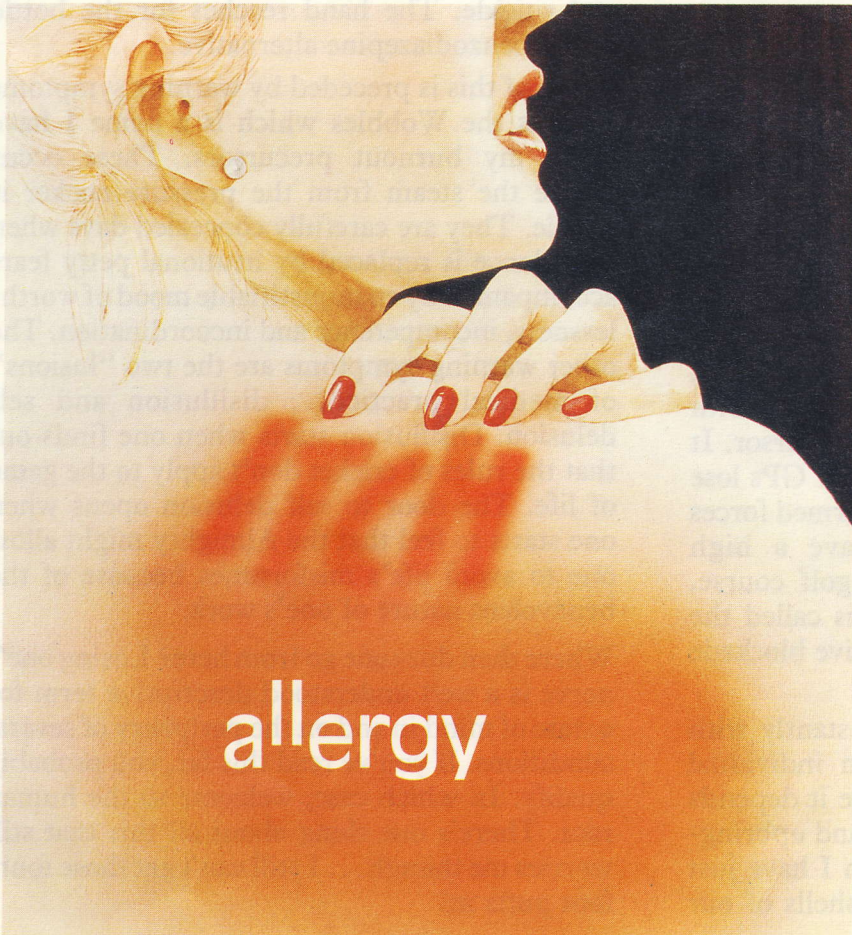
G P Syndrome

by Chris Ellis

When I joined the partnership I asked over tea, which in those days before vocational training was the main medium for learning about family medicine, why the previous doctor had left. The reply was unexpected. He had got G P Syndrome. I hadn't heard of that one before. I expected it to be another name for Burnout whereby professionals become discouraged and uncaring with gradual withdrawal and cynicism. No, they said, it wasn't quite like that. The previous partner had worked well for many years and was a good G P surgeon, as is often required in rural towns in Africa. He had started to worry about his ability to operate. He found he was

unable to sleep even before routine operations such as a tonsillectomy. It became such a problem that he stopped operating altogether. A few months later he stopped doing maternity cases and the end came when he couldn't bring himself to give intramuscular injections in the surgery. He had, as is known in lay terms, "lost his nerve".

I dismissed this with the confidence of youth until many years later when I started to worry about my anaesthetics. They were competent and trouble free, yet I started to imagine everything that could possibly go wrong and their consequences. I too couldn't sleep the night



S2 Oxatomide
Q/5.7.1/35 Tablets 30mg
Q/5.7.1/36 Suspension 25mg/ml

TRADEMARK
 **Tinset**

An anti-allergic agent
with a unique two-fold
action

- Stabilizes mast cells and inhibits allergic mediators
- Blocks histamine receptors... alleviates patient discomfort

For prescribing information see package insert.

 **JANSSEN**
PHARMACEUTICA

Janssen Pharmaceutica (Pty) Ltd.
(Reg. No. 80/11122/07)
15th Road, Halfway House 1685
©JPh (Pty) Ltd. South Africa.



before a list. My Medical Defence Union Annual Report was left unread. It was too disturbing. I was losing my nerve.

What then was "losing one's nerve"? Considering the current inclination by the psychologists to dissect and analyse every facet of human emotion and distress I could find nothing on it. Then I read about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the term that has replaced Shell Shock and Battle Fatigue. But to qualify for that you have to have been in the Vietnam war, half battered to death or raped. I had just been doing general practice.

Perhaps there is a subtler minor form that one can get, not from one cataclysmic event, but from a series of smaller personal intellectual invasions repeated over a longer period. It could be part of the symptomatology of other groups, such as anxiety neurosis, a specific phobia with avoidance reactions, or a burnout precursor. It doesn't only occur in GPs, in fact few GPs lose their nerve. Pilots, members of the armed forces and circus performers must have a high incidence. It also occurs on the golf course, especially on the greens where it is called the "yipps". There is total proprioceptive blockade to the putter.

Its cause? Stress, a word now constantly with us, plays the major role. It is an individual business and one's ability to handle it depends on one's personality, belief system and upbringing. The S-type personality (which I have just invented) is stress sensitive. The shells of our

egos are thinner than we would like people to know about and we need more reassurance than we are prepared to admit to. The excitement and challenge to one man may mean emotional incontinence to another. There are though, well documented precipitating factors such as overwork and too much responsibility. The velocity of the twentieth century has a lot to do with it. Life can easily become a continual stream of patients, extra calls, paperwork, overbooking and interruptions followed by an unending staff meeting. The untutored role as a receptacle of one's patients' emotional catharses magnifies all this. The eyes glaze over and the stethoscope listens on automatic pilot. Other similar subtle influences affect medical life. We indulge in a type of professional incest whereby one can lose contact with the world outside the profession and one's tight social unit. This draws in the horizons so that small incidents blow up into large threats and one is left feeling miscast in a play in which the environment is pulling the strings.

This is of course the same ground that depression grows in and is the impetus for alcoholism and suicide. The hand reaches for the bottle or the benzodiazepine alternative.

Much of this is preceded by warning symptoms such as the Wobbles which is a name I have given my burnout precursors. These occur before the steam from the pressure cooker is visible. They are carefully concealed days when confidence is replaced by irrational petty fears accompanied by an unjustifiable mood of worthlessness, incompetence and incoordination. The other warning symptoms are the two "lusions" of medical practice... disillusion and self delusion. Disillusion starts when one finds out that the rules of cricket don't apply to the game of life. The door to self delusion opens when one starts to feel that the Almighty might allow one to avoid life's misfortunes because of the benevolent nature of one's work.

Where then does one go from here? Losing one's nerve is a well understood descriptive term for a state of mind in and on the periphery of several conditions. If you've read this far, you probably qualify. In which case, welcome to the human race. There's one thing about all this that still worries me though... I still can't get those four-foot putts in.