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Parkinson's Disease History

Parkinson's is a condition that has been known about since ancient times. It is referred to in the ancient Indian medical system of Ayurveda under the name Kampavata. In Western medical literature it was described by the physician Galen as "shaking palsy" in AD 175. However it was not until 1817 that a detailed medical essay was published on the subject by London doctor James Parkinson.

The publication was entitled "An Essay on the Shaking Palsy". This established Parkinson's disease as a recognised medical condition. The essay was based on six cases he had observed in his own practise and on walks around his neighbourhood. The essay was intended to encourage others to study the disease. Some 60 years after it was first published, a French neurologist by the name of Jean Martin Charcot did exactly that. Charcot was the first to truly recognise the importance of Parkinson's work and named the disease after him.

Much has been learned about the disease yet much remains a mystery. The symptoms are progressive and degenerative and tend to be more common in older individuals. It is understood that a dopamine deficiency in the brain is at the root of the matter, yet why this initially occurs is less clear.

It was in the 1960s that the chemical differences in the brains of Parkinson's patients were identified. The low levels of dopamine cause the degeneration of nerve cells in part of the brain called the *substantia nigra*. It was this discovery that led to the first effective medicinal treatment of the disease. In the 1960s the drug Levodopa was first administered to treat the symptoms and has since become the "gold standard" in medication.

Since the 1960's research has continued to progress at a rapid rate. Despite the fact there is still no cure, the symptoms can now be effectively controlled and reduced in severity. The Parkinson's Disease Foundation was established in America in 1957 to assist sufferers and to fund and promote further research. Many other foundations assisting the cause have been established in the following years. A notable recent addition is the Michael J Fox Foundation, named after the much loved television and movie actor. The foundation has been very public about its goal of developing a cure for the disease within this decade. Since its inception in 2000 it has succeeded in raising over 90 million US dollars.

Progress on all fronts is gaining momentum. Hope for the future of the "Shaking Palsy", it seems, is decidedly solid.

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