

## Letter

### Concept of Psychological Trauma

*SIR: We believe that the following, on the origin of the concept of psychological trauma, may be of interest to the readers of the journal.*

The concept of psychological trauma has taxed the best psychiatric minds since the late nineteenth century. It is widely believed to have originated with Breuer and Freud (1), but as with the concept of the unconscious, psychological trauma had earlier antecedents. We feel it is worth mentioning them because of their continuing relevance for the nosology of posttraumatic stress disorder.

The nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Janet (2) saw psychic trauma as crucially mediated by vivid or "vehement" emotions. These were further prompted by traumatic memories and exerted a disintegrating effect on the mind (3). The first to introduce the term "psychic trauma," however, was the German neurologist Albert Eulenburg in 1878 (4, p. 589). He believed that "psychic shock," in the form of sudden vehement emotions such as terror or anger, could better be called psychic trauma. He regarded this "sudden action of vehement emotions" as an actual molecular concussion of the brain, which he likened to the commotio cerebri postulated in physical trauma. Since then, other German physicians have also equated the concepts of psychic shock and psychic trauma (5). It is only recently, however, that these ideas regarding the molecular basis of posttraumatic stress disorders have begun to find a basis in scientific fact rather than fancy, as exemplified in research on trauma and neurotransmitters.

#### REFERENCES

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