MATER PUEORUM, THE HISTORY OF A TERM

In the pediatric treatises of the medieval translations from the Arabic, particularly those of Rhazes and Avicenna, an illness called « mater puerorum » is described. This term was often discussed in the children's regimens of the Renaissance (1) and in the historical pediatric literature of this century (2) because its meaning is not completely clear (3). The lack of clarity which surrounds this term results from the fact that the aspects of two different illnesses, pavor nocturnus and epilepsy are classified under it.

The aspect of the illness pavor nocturnus is listed under « mater puerorum » in the Practica puerorum by Rhazes (4), whose Arabic original has been lost, or perhaps not yet found again. We quote here the translation after Radbill (5):

Now follows about a certain affliction which is called mater puerorum. This infirmity happens to children in the first period of life frequently. The sign of it is great wailing or much fear during the sleep, and fever increased by the sleeplessness; and from the child's mouth a foul odor issues forth. The cause of this ailment is the taking of more milk than the child can digest.

The text just quoted above from the Practica puerorum directly followed the chapter on epilepsy. Nonetheless, Redbill still interprets this illness as epilepsy and not as pavor nocturnus. Let me quote his interpretation (6):

Mater puerorum, the mother of children, is a translation of the Greek hysteria, referring to the uterus or matrix, supposedly the seat of this disease. All through the English literature we read of « the mother » which eventually was supplanted by the « vapours ». Hippocrates called it « pathos paydon », the infantile disease, a term long used for epilepsy in children.

In his suggested interpretation Radbill was influenced to a great extent by Still. In « The History of Pediatrics » Still devotes almost an entire chapter to the discussion of this term (7). However, for his interpretation of the term « mater puerorum » he takes one of two descriptions of the illness, which we will quote below, from another work by Rhazes, the Continens (Kitāb al-ḥāwī). Unfortunately, he uses the incorrectly translated section. Nevertheless, he, too, comes to the conclusion that « mater puerorum » is a synonym for epilepsy. This is probably because he wanted to see the term translated grammatically a little bit more freely as « the mother in children ». In his suggested translation he makes the same mistake that the medieval translators make when translating the Arabic texts into Latin : He translates word for word and not syntagmatically (8).

In short, the term « Mother » by itself, came to mean what we know as the globus hystericus, and then a hysterical fit of any sort. Is it not probable that the use of the term in regard to children arose from the supposed similarity of