ABSTRACT. While researching concepts of neurasthenia as described by patients and physicians of various backgrounds, it was found that there is a great discrepancy between the two groups. In this study, questionnaires were administered to 70 psychiatric patients, 6 Chinese medicine men, 44 general physicians and 35 neuropsychiatrists, to inquire into the reasons for positive or negative attitudes toward neurasthenia. Half of the clinical patients believed that they were suffering from neurasthenia. Neurasthenia is a predominate term used for various types of distress arising mainly from psychiatric diseases. Chinese medicine men are aware that this term is a medical diagnosis introduced from the West. Through experience they regard neurasthenia as a kind of deficit of nerve. Apparently, the concept of neurasthenia has been integrated into the Chinese medical system, a fact substantiated by its longstanding, nosological use by the public.

Younger generation physicians within both general and neuropsychiatric disciplines on the whole reject neurasthenia as a diagnostic term. However, one-third of neuropsychiatrists and 40% of general physicians use this term in their practice in order to improve the treatment of and to establish good communication and rapport with the patients whom they treat. Most of them, however, do not use the term in their formal diagnosis. The concept of the illness, neurasthenia, is historically rooted and today presents a nosological dilemma. It will eventually be transformed conceptually and disappear from the public mind.

INTRODUCTION

There exists a considerable confusion in the use of the term neurasthenia by the general public, patients and physicians in Taiwan today. The general public and patients use the term as a diagnostic label which includes many ill-defined physical symptoms and mental dysfunctions, regardless of their organic or functional origin. All types of neurosis, psychophysologic disorders and even some psychoses are often included in this category. Patients with neurasthenia seek and receive a large variety of medical and non-medical treatments that are available in the society. They use herbs, tonics and medicines at home, visit Western physicians, Chinese medicine men and folk healers, or pray to gods in temples.

In contrast to the widespread use by the public, the term of neurasthenia is not generally employed as a diagnostic term by Western physicians; they may use the term only when convenient to explain to the patients a certain morbid condition. In contrast to the Western trained physicians, the majority of Chinese medicine men have adopted this term and used it frequently, sometimes in conjunction with the concept of shen-k'uei.¹

There are several popular views on the etiology of neurasthenia, which may be translated as "weakness of the nervous system." Weakness (or shuai-jo) of the nervous systems and the blood stream (hsüeh-lu) within the body are conceived as two cardinal conditions of neurasthenia. The following are examples of popular views on causative factors.

1. Developmental Deficit During Childhood

A 69 year-old man, suffering from chronic anxiety accompanied by severe insomnia is convinced that his condition of neurasthenia is caused by pai-shen (deteriorated kidney) probably related to nasal bleeding and serious malnutrition he suffered during his childhood. His family was so poor that he suffered from malnutrition and weakness (hsü-jo). Lately he loses sleep after smoking only part of a cigarette. He is afraid to eat fish which popularly is regarded as bad for his cataract. He was also warned by friends that cataract patients should not eat duck meat or animal viscera either. He is very careful about what he eats and takes every precaution to preserve his energy in his daily life in order to strengthen his nerves. He constantly seeks medical help from anyone recommended to him as an expert or in possession of certain remedies.

2. Dysfunction or Deficit of Vital Energy

A 23 year-old man, unmarried, a carpenter by occupation, has been suffering from neurasthenia for nearly six years. He started masturbation and nocturnal emission at age 16. Often he suffered from dizziness, palpitation, bodily weakness, numb-weak extremities, and headaches when he woke up in the morning following masturbation. He was diagnosed as shen-k'uei (weakness of kidney) by a Chinese medicine man and given herbs. His work as a carpenter was constantly dull. During the years he was in military service, he discontinued masturbation for fear of losing vital energy, but he was often quite sick during the military service. Having returned home recently, he is still incapable of working because of chronic exhaustion and various somatic symptoms which he believes to have resulted from deficit of vital (sexual) energy caused by masturbation and nocturnal emission in his earlier life.