Vitiligo, the “small blemish” (from the Latin vitilum; Mercurialis, 1572; fig.1) was first described more than 1500 years BC. It is probable that ancient descriptions represent other diseases, such as leprosy, as it is only in the last century that vitiligo vulgaris has been used to describe the disease sincers of acquired melanocyte destruction (Singh et al, 1974).

Both pre-Hindu Vedic (fig.2) and ancient Egyptian texts (fig.3) give a clear record of depigmented macules, the Vedic myth being that the anthropomorphic deification of the sun, Bhagavatam, developed vitiligo after being gazed upon by his illegitimate son (fig.4). In one of the first text books of Ayurvedic medicine, the Charaka samhita (100 AD), svitra (“whiteness”) is recorded as a diagnosis (fig.5). An accurate description also exists in a collection of Japanese Shinto prayers, Amarakosa, dating from 1200 BC (fig.6) (Nair et al, 1978).

Leprosy is recorded as a pale swelling, distinct from vitiligo in the Ebers Papyrus (an Egyptian collection of writings from 1500 – 3000 BC, fig.2), but there is no such demarcation between the two diseases in either the Bible (fig.9) or in the first European description of the disease by Hippocrates (fig.10). Sadly, this type of “non-discrimination” persists in many communities in the world today, where vitiligo sufferers are sometimes shunned in the same age-old way as people with leprosy. To his credit, Hippocrates was the first to report that vitiligo was easier to treat at the same age-old way as people with leprosy. They also both noticed that none of the then available treatments made much impact on the disease! Plus ça change?

The end of the 19th century was a time of much progress in the understanding of vitiligo. Moriz Kaposi in Vienna was one of the first to describe the histopathology, observing only a lack of pigment granules in the deep rete cells (Kaposi, 1879; fig.12, fig.13). At around the same time, in Bergen, Gerhard Hansen observed the presence of small rods within “lepra cells” and thus established a clear pathogenesis for leprosy (Fyrand, 1983). Both Neumann in Vienna (1880) and Brocq (1892) in Paris observed that episodes of emotional stress can lead to flare-ups of vitiligo. They also both noticed that none of the then available treatments made much impact on the disease! Plus ça change?

We have much to learn from both the sociological and medical history of vitiligo, if we are to make progress in improving the management of this ancient disease in the modern world.

References

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