

**George Van Ness Dearborn MD
PhD (1869–1938): A forgotten
American neuropsychiatrist and
physiologist**

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TO THE EDITOR:

Andrew Miller's book, *Ingenious Pain*, is about an 18th century fictional physician who had a congenital insensitivity to pain. Two patients who I recently examined, belong to a Bedouin tribe in which this syndrome was found in 28 members [1]. Patients with the rare CIPA autosomal recessive genetic disease experience recurrent episodes of fever, hidrosis, absence of reaction to noxious stimuli, prolonged healing times, and mental retardation. They also self-mutilate [1].

This syndrome was first described in 1932 by George Van Ness Dearborn as a congenital pure analgesia [2]. Dearborn was born in 1869, in Nashua, Hillsborough, New Hampshire, USA. He graduated from College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York in 1893 and from the medical department of Columbia University, Washington, DC, where he was graduated with the degree of MD. He became a noted neuropsychiatrist and a pioneer in the use of ink-blot tests for personality analysis. For 15 years he served as a professor and director of the laboratory of physiology at Tufts College, Boston, MA, USA. He was a fellow of Boston Society of Natural History and the American Psy-

chiatric Association. Later he moved to New York and worked at the Bronx Veterans Administration Hospital. His list of publications is impressive. While working at Tufts Medical School he advocated teaching psychology as part of medical training [3]. He discussed and elaborated the meaning of basic terms such as psychogenesis (the effect of the mind on the body), kinesthesia (the sense mediated by receptors located in muscles, tendons, and joints and stimulated by the bodily movements), cenesthesia (the general feeling of inhabiting one's body that arises from multiple stimuli from various bodily organs), amentia (congenital feeble-mindedness), joy, learning, motor-sensory development, apraxia, intellectual regression and progression, euphoria, intuition, habits, and more.

In addition to neuropsychiatry, Dearborn oversaw a course in physiology of exercise at the Sargent Normal School, Cambridge, MA, USA. For this program, he combined his expertise in psychology, physiology, medicine, and education. In the field of education, he divided childhood into three phases: neuromuscular training proper; the accumulation of data; and development of skills, cleverness, or aptness whether of the body predominantly or of the mind. He used the term *sthenic index*, which meant notably or excessively vigorous or active.

Dearborn was attracted by other topics including physical education, the nature of the smile and laugh, habit culture, and pain sensation in animals. He believed that the sources of the satisfaction, which underlie the formation of habits, are nearly as various as the habits themselves. To name these habits would be to

almost describe the motives of a young child's behavior, because almost everything is habituation.

He felt that the human face was the index of personality, of humanity itself. It is the most beautiful of all things known to man. To preserve its normal beauty is a duty, a birthright due to every child. The outside of the human face is at once the most beautiful and interesting of all material objects whatsoever. The inside (that complex of organs and structure behind the mirror of the soul) has more concern with health than has any other one portion of the body, and given health and beauty, happiness is not far away [4].

"This matter is really more important than the necessary brevity of its statement might suggest to you... This joyousness of satisfaction has its most familiar symbol in the crushing of inexpedient habits—links in that great living chain with which life forever binds itself but through which alone human personality is conceivable," according to Dr. Dearborn, who died in New York City in 1938.

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In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.

Thurgood Marshall (1908–1993), U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Life is a jest, and all things show it, / I thought so once, and now I know it.

John Gay (1685–1732), poet and dramatist