Luis Barraquer Roviralta

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ABSTRACT

Luis Barraquer Roviralta, who fathered the Barraquer dynasty of neurologists, was a key figure in the rise of neurology as a specialty in Spain. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he never practiced psychiatry. Following his largely self-directed studies of neurology, during which he corresponded with many leading foreign scholars of his time, he opened what would become the Neurology Department at Hospital de la Santa Creu in Barcelona. While he displayed an interest in a wide range of neurological topics, he was especially dedicated to semiology and pathology of the peripheral nervous system and trophic disorders, taking photographs of many of his cases. His published articles addressed such topics as neural leprosy and lipodystrophy, and he contributed two eponyms to the literature. In addition to his articles, Barraquer Roviralta left behind a wealth of fascinating photographs and letters offering insight into the early days of clinical neurology.

KEYWORDS
Neurology in Catalonia, cephalothoracic lipodystrophy, progressive unilateral atrophy, Barraquer’s reflex

Luis Barraquer Roviralta (Figure 1) was born in Barcelona in 1855 and several versions of his biography have been published at different times.1-4 He is unanimously considered to be the founder of neurology in Catalonia and one of the pioneers of neurology in Spain. In his day it was customary to combine the practices of neurology and psychiatry, which he refused to do although that decision reduced his income considerably. In Barcelona, he founded the Neurology Department at Hospital de la Santa Creu (which later became Hospital de la Santa Creu i San Pau). This department was the only one able to keep the flame of neurology alive in Spain in the difficult years following the Spanish Civil War (1936-39); most of the other neurology departments disappeared, especially those in Madrid. Luis Barraquer Roviralta gave rise to a dynasty of prestigious neurologists which included his son Luis Barraquer Ferré and grandson Lluís Barraquer Bordas. They both became heads of the department first established by Barraquer Roviralta. His older brother José Antonio fathered yet another dynasty, of internationally renowned ophthalmologists in this case.

Luis Barraquer Roviralta was to a great extent self-taught. His professor of medicine, Bartolomé Robert, sparked his
interest in the diseases of the nervous system, but young Luis did not have the opportunity to take advantage of the teachings of any existing school of neurology. However, he was an assiduous reader of the articles published by the noteworthy authors of his time, and he exchanged letters with many of those scholars. Barraquer Bordas kept a valuable collection of the handwritten letters his grandfather had received from Charcot, Hammond, and other leading authorities in neurology. These documents and many others bequeathed by Barraquer Roviralta, including thousands of clinical and pathology photographs, are preserved by the Museum of the History of Medicine of Catalonia and MAH SEN, the Spanish Society of Neurology's museum and historical archive.

Barraquer Roviralta’s first outpatient clinic at Hospital de la Santa Creu was named the ‘Electrotherapy Dispensary’; years later, its name was changed to the ‘Neurology and Electrotherapy Department’ before finally becoming known as the Neurology Department. As we might expect from his mastery of electrology and electrotherapy, novel methods in those years, his main interest within the field of neurology was the peripheral nervous system. His first article, published in 1885, described a case of peripheral paralysis of all four limbs, and it was followed by others on paralysis caused by leprosy and other entities. In *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* he published a long article, complete with numerous illustrations and personal reflections, that constitutes a treatise on the many and varied forms of neural leprosy. His interest in lesions of the peripheral nervous system led him to complete a meticulous study of peripheral nerve degeneration and regeneration using an experimental model of sciatic nerve lesions in the rabbit (Figure 2).7-8

Barraquer Roviralta was a very thorough clinical observer and a conscientious student of neurosemiology who painstakingly analysed the meaning of such signs as the grasp reflex of the foot (Figure 3) and the idiomuscular response. The subject of his speech upon being admitted to the prestigious Royal Academy of Medicine of Barcelona was the seminal value of the idiomuscular response, and his presentation constitutes a compendium of his extensive and highly detailed examinations of all possible types of patients and the pathological reactions of muscles in a wide variety of conditions, including those in cadavers and amputated limbs!

The grasp reflex of the foot is one of two eponyms that passed into the medical literature because of Barraquer Roviralta; it was cited by Wartenberg and Brain as ‘Barraquer’s reflex’. Barraquer Ferré demonstrated its semiological value as an indicator of a prefrontal lesion using clinicopathological correlations, as did Richter and Hines through experiments.

The second use of Barraquer as an eponym (Barraquer–Simons syndrome) is linked to his original description of cephalothoracic lipodystrophy, published in 1906 and reproduced a year later in a German journal. Rodriguez Arias, one of Barraquer Roviralta’s disciples, dedicated his presentation in the inaugural session of the Spanish Neurology Society in 1949 to ‘Barraquer’s disease’. The patients affected by this

![Figure 2. First page of Barraquer Roviralta’s Études cliniques et expérimentales en Neurologie (1910).](image-url)
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He also made many other notable contributions. In 1897 he published an article on athetosis in which he included a case of ‘double athetosis’, regarded in retrospect as a pioneering description of idiopathic torsion dystonia.

Barraquer Roviralta developed an interest in neurology as a whole and promoted the establishment of neurosurgery in Barcelona, as was acknowledged by Eduardo Tolosa; he advocated surgical interventions not only for expansive processes but also for cases of epilepsy caused by localised brain lesions.

Barraquer Roviralta enjoyed well-deserved professional prestige as a neurologist that extended beyond Barcelona, to the whole of Spain and even abroad. However, his fame could not lessen the tragedy of the death of both of his wives and his son by his first wife. He was a man of simple tastes who loved life in the country, hunting small game, and breeding pigeons. He died of pneumonia in 1928 in his home in Sant Climent de Llobregat a few kilometres from Barcelona.

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References