The medical medal collection of the Spanish Society of Neurology’s Historical Archive

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ABSTRACT

The medical medal collection that the Spanish Society of Neurology’s Historical Archive has received as part of the bequest by Drs. Antonio and Manuel Subirana includes 23 die-struck pieces representing scientific encounters, prominent figures, and institutional events. Some of the most important pieces include the medal struck for the 5th International Congress of Neurology (Lisbon, 7-12 September, 1953) and honouring Santiago Ramón y Cajal and Constantin von Monakow; the medal featuring Théophile Alajouanine; the centenary medal for the National Hospital at Queen Square; and the medal struck to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Otfrid Foerster, whose important contributions to the neurosurgery included using rhizotomy to treat spasticity and cordotomy for chronic pain. Pío del Río-Hortega was also honoured for his contributions to neurohistology. His main topic of research was microglia, and in 1921 he described these structures’ mesodermal origin and phagocytic functions in different pathological processes. We present a collection that will be of great interest for historical researchers exploring the fields of medicine and neurology.

KEYWORDS
Medical numismatics, medical medals, international congresses of neurology, Pío del Río-Hortega, Otfrid Foerster

The collection of commemorative medals that the SEN Historical Archive received as part of the bequest by Drs Antonio and Manuel Subirana includes 23 die-struck pieces representing scientific encounters, prominent figures, and institutional events. This is a very interesting collection for historical researchers exploring the fields of medicine and neurology.

Commemorative medals, pieces of metal intended for display and with no monetary value, began to be produced in the times of the Roman Empire. They were later revived during the Renaissance by Pisanello (Antonio Pisano, 1395-1455). The production of medals with medical and scientific themes increased exponentially. Such medals enjoyed great popularity in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, and large collections, both private and institutional, were created as a result. Exonumia, the discipline within numismatics that studies medals, offers interesting historical evidence of individual or collective achievements and scientific, institutional, and professional events.

Collection

Medals commemorating scientific encounters:
- 5th International Congress of Neurology (Lisbon, 7-12 September, 1953). Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934) and Constantin von Monakow (1853-1930) (Figure 1).


Medals representing prominent figures:
− Frédéric Bremer (1892–1982). Professor at the University of Brussels (1932-1962).
− Auguste Tournay (1878-1969). De l’anisocorie dans le regard latéral (la réaction de Tournay).
− Théophile Alajouanine (1890-1980). Honneur des Hommes Saint Langage./ Discours prophétique et paré,/ Belles chaînes en qui s’engage/ Le Dieu dans la chair égare… Paul Valéry (Figure 2).

Medals representing institutions:

− Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852-1934). Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (1906). Excolere victum hominum.
− Severo Ochoa de Albornoz (1905-1993). Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (1959). Excolere victum hominum. RNA. DNA.
− António Caetano de Abreu Freire Egas Moniz (1874-1955). First professor of neurology at the Lisbon Faculty of Medicine (1911-1944). Homage on the 50th anniversary of his death.
Medal of the 10th International Congress of Neurology

The 10th International Congress of Neurology was held between the 8th and the 15th September, 1973, in Barcelona’s Palau Nacional. The congress was presided over by Antonio Subirana with José María Espadaler as secretary general. The congress included the following lectures:

1. Iatrogenic neurological diseases. Chair: A. Subirana (Spain); co-chairs: J.D. Spillane (United Kingdom), H.H. Merritt (USA).


3. Genetic and transmissible dementias. Chairs: G. Alemà (Italy), E. Bay (Germany). We should highlight the lecture by D.C. Gajdusek, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1976 for discovering that kuru could be transmitted from humans to chimpanzees.

4. Myasthenia and myasthenic syndromes. Chair: P. Castaigne (France), co-chairs: I. Hausmanowa (Poland), J.A. Simpson (United Kingdom).

5. Transient ischaemic attacks in cerebrovascular disease. Chair: V Schmidt (Russia), F. Plum (USA).

At the president’s recommendation, the SEN unanimously approved featuring profile portraits of Otfrid Foerster (1873-1941) and Pío del Río-Hortega (1882-1945) on the medal of the congress (Figure 4). This medal commemorated the centenary of Otfrid Foerster’s birth and his neurosurgical contributions of rhizotomy for treating spasticity and cordotomy for chronic pain. Based on his knowledge of physiology and surgery, he was able to create a new map of dermatomes of the human body. Highlights from his biography include being sent for by the Soviet government to treat Lenin, who had suffered a cerebrovascular accident.5

The other profile on the medal, Pío del Río-Hortega, had earned local and international recognition for his work in neurohistology. His research focused on microglia, and in 1921 he published a description of their mesodermal origin and phagocytic functions in different pathological processes. In 1924, German scientists Metz and Spatz published a study on microglia in which they referred to those structures as ‘Hortega cells’. The current classification system for central nervous system tumours is based on Pío del Río-Hortega’s model, which was published posthumously in Buenos Aires.5

References