

The human side of Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta: a historical overview (1855-1928)

A. Arboix

Cerebrovascular Disease Unit, Neurology Department. Hospital Universitari del Sagrat Cor. Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.

ABSTRACT

Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta (1855-1928) was the father of clinical neurology in Catalonia and Spain. He was Bartomeu Robert's favourite student and also laid the foundations of neurosurgery as a new specialty. An active and tireless researcher, one of his most remarkable traits was his humility. Dr Barraquer Roviralta was a perfect gentleman, a superb clinician, an original researcher, and a reference for neurology in Catalonia. The Barraquer Roviralta archive presents a valuable testimony to neurology in his time; it includes a vast collection of literature, in addition to some two thousand original photographs. Paradoxically, despite his fame and prestige, Dr Barraquer Roviralta remained a modest and accessible person, and a lover of the countryside. He died on 12 October 1928 at the age of 73.

KEY WORDS

Barraquer Roviralta, history, Catalan neurology, neurology, Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau

Introduction

Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta was the father of neurology in Catalonia. Although his contributions to scientific research have been chronicled in a number of studies,¹⁻⁴ little has been written about his personality and private life. The present article therefore proposes to fill this gap.

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was born in Barcelona in 1855 and studied medicine in his home town. A brilliant student, he graduated at the age of 23, in 1878.^{1,5} His main two mentors were his own brother, Dr Josep Barraquer, an illustrious ophthalmologist and expert in nervous system anatomy, and Dr Bartomeu Robert (one of Dr Letamendi's students), a renowned internist with an enthusiastic interest in clinical neurology. Dr Barraquer Roviralta was also civic-minded, which led him to a successful bid for mayor of Barcelona.⁶

In 1882, at the age of 27 and four years after finishing his studies in medicine, he was entrusted with the first department of nervous system diseases to be created in Catalonia and Spain, at Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, in Barcelona. Therefore, 1882 is considered the year

in which clinical neurology originated in Spain.^{6,7} Barraquer Roviralta would later set up the neurology department at Hospital de Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón, known today as Hospital Universitari del Sagrat Cor. Neurological hospital care at that time was available in only two hospitals in Barcelona: Hospital de la Santa Creu and Hospital de Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón⁷ (Figures 1 and 2).

Barraquer's department at Hospital de la Santa Creu was called the Electrotherapeutic Dispensary. In 1922, he became a member of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia, joining such eminent figures as Drs Cardenal, Fargas, Ribas, Suñé, and Molist.^{4,5}

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was a contemporary of several ground-breaking Catalan doctors who contributed to the field of neurology. One was Dr Artur Galceran i Granés (1850-1919), who in 1911 became president and founder of the first neurological society in either Catalonia or Spain: the Barcelona Society of Psychiatry and Neurology.^{8,9} Another example was Dr Josep Falp i Plana (1873-1914), a doctor to poet and priest Jacint Verdaguer

and also a pioneering figure in the study of stroke symptoms and epidemiology. Working in Solsona and other nearby villages, Falp i Plana conducted research on stroke (*feridura* in Catalan). He published the results in a book titled *Topografia Mèdica*, which received a prize from the Academy of Medical and Health Sciences of Catalonia and the Balearic Isles.¹⁰⁻¹³

Dr Barraquer Roviralta had the misfortune of losing his two wives —the first one died shortly after marriage and the second, when their son Luis was three— as well as his son by his first wife. In the words of his grandson, Dr Barraquer Bordas: “At the age of 35, only two loves remained to Barraquer Roviralta: his children and neurology”.¹⁵

Teaching activity

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was tireless and hard-working in all of his endeavours. One of his most remarkable traits was his humility. This was the reason why he was not keen on giving speeches or conference talks; his lectures, however, were so masterful and had such profound clinical implications that they were unforgettable.^{2,3} His efforts and his uncommon working capacity resulted in the creation of a personal archive in which he documented his experience in clinical neurology in images and writings. His photography collection included around two thousand plates, a staggering and unequalled number at that time.¹⁵

Another aspect of Dr Barraquer Roviralta’s clinical pursuits undoubtedly contributed to his prestige, but it is less well-known. Barraquer Roviralta was the first doctor in Spain to indicate treatment of certain brain lesions when only one viable option existed: surgery. This being the case, he was the father of neurosurgery in Spain. Beginning in 1910, he recommended surgery for several patients with focal epilepsy that was secondary to trauma in most cases. The interventions aimed to resect the cortical areas affected by the lesion. Barraquer Roviralta’s conviction motivated such eminent surgeons as Salvador Cardenal, Enrique Ribas, and Antoni Reventós to perform the first operations on certain brain lesions. As a result, neurosurgery emerged as a separate surgical specialty.^{1,5,6}

According to Drs Barraquer Bordas,¹ Martí-Vilalta et al.,² and Balcells,⁶ his most significant contributions to the medical literature covered the following topics: cephalothoracic lipodystrophy, absence of deep muscle reflexes plus increased idiomuscular response, the plantar prehensile reflex, athetosis associated with paediatric encephalopathy, and diffuse hemilateral atrophy. Barraquer’s name was given to each of these findings in the Spanish literature, and his publications, whether books or articles, were numerous. Table 1 lists the most important scientific studies by this author in chronological order.⁴

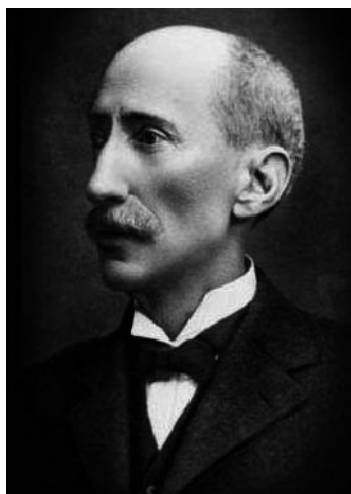


Figure 1. Dr Barraquer Roviralta

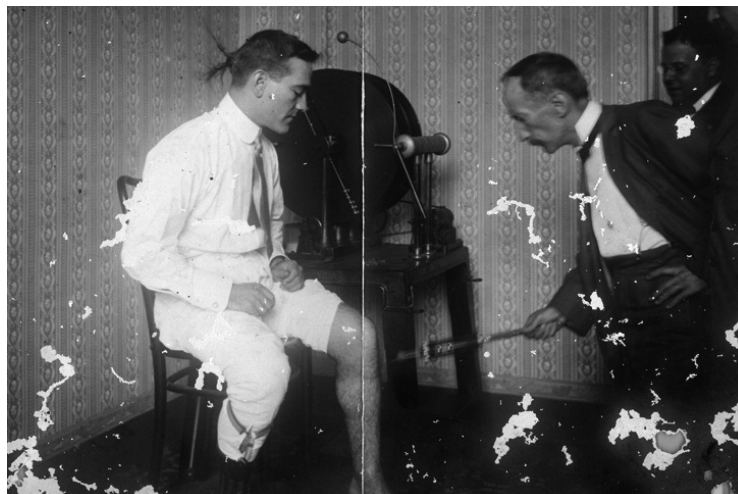


Figure 2. Dr Barraquer Roviralta performing a neurological examination on a patient

Personality traits

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was held in high regard by both patients and colleagues. He was known for being extremely respectful and kind in his dealings with his colleagues, and he made no distinction between young or junior doctors and experienced professionals.^{2,3,16}

Table 1. Major works by Dr Barraquer Roviralta

1885	Parálisis periférica protopática de las cuatro extremidades
1887	Contribución al estudio de las parálisis periféricas
1894	Contribución al estudio del electro-diagnóstico de las parálisis de origen bulbar
1895	Mielitis sistemática
1896	Terapéutica de la tabes dorsal atáxica
1897	Atetosis doble Contribución al estudio de la atetosis
1902	Conmoción medular
1903	Fisiología del cerebro. Corteza y centros sensoriales
1906	Lipodistrofia progresiva Historia clínica de un caso de atrofia del tejido célula-adiposo
1907	Histoire clinique d'un cas d'atrophie du tissu celluloso-adipeux
1910	Las algias tabéticas Études cliniques et expérimentales de neurologie. Degeneration et regeneration du système nerveux périphérique
1913	Malalties del sistema muscular. L'atròfia muscular artrítica
1914	Contribution à la symptomatologie du système nerveux périphérique
1917	Anatomia patològica del sistema nerviós
1918	Paquimengitis interna hemorràgica
1919	Las neuritis traumáticas
1920	Sobre la simpatectomía
1921	Presentación de un caso de contractura de origen quirúrgico, diferenciándola de otras disquinesias de origen central Contribution à l'étude du reflexe plantaire pathologique
1922	Valor semiológico de la contracción idiomuscular
1924	Un caso de distrofia adiposa juvenil
1925	Contribución al estudio de los síndromes endocrino-simpáticos. Atrofia generalizada hemilateral
1926	El tonus
1927	Patogenia de las trofoneurosis
1928	Cas de sarcoma frontal perforant Lesiones de compresión cerebral Estudio experimental de la degeneración y regeneración del sistema nervioso periférico

Barraquer Roviralta was a humble man who never boasted about his education or knowledge despite being the head of the neurology department. More than a teacher and department head, he was a loyal and honest companion with time for anyone who came to him seeking advice or scientific explanations, and the support he provided only added to his undeniable greatness.

His unassuming nature made him accessible to everybody. Barraquer was comfortable among simple folk and his department colleagues. It was in his department that he examined his patients, listened to them, and offered them treatment—or at least some comfort and good advice—with such dedication.

He was a perfect gentleman, a superb clinician, an original researcher, a tireless worker, and a reference for neurology in Catalonia. In addition to being extremely methodical and courteous, he was quite the outdoorsman.^{2,3}

Dr Barraquer Roviralta was also known for his modest attire and for remaining unchanged and unspoilt in the face of his fame and impressive clientèle.

He displayed an almost mystical streak that led him to spend countless hours surrounded by books and patients. His was an unpretentious life and he rejected ostentation in all its forms. These ascetic tendencies contrasted starkly with the extroverted behaviour of some of his fellow doctors of his time. Despite having limited his

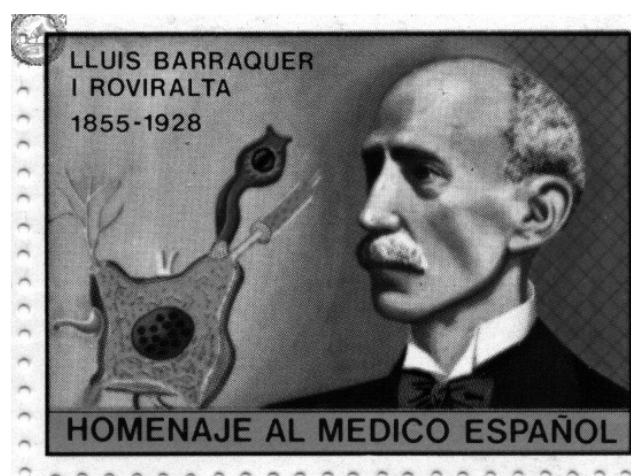


Figure 3. Dr Luis Barraquer Roviralta was featured in a series of stamps celebrating eminent Spanish doctors (Madrid, 1981. Portrait: Luis Rodríguez Puertas)

social interactions, he made his mark on the history of neurology (Figure 3).^{1-4,14}

Dr Barraquer Roviralta died on 12 October 1928 in his country house in Sant Climent de Llobregat (Barcelona) at the age of 73.

Conclusions

In addition to his fruitful scientific and clinical activity, Dr Barraquer Roviralta was known for his humility, his modesty, and his kindness to his colleagues. These traits earned him the respect of many at a time when famous doctors were known for being much more outgoing.

Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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