

An important personality of psychosurgery: the italian psychiatrist Mario Adamo Fiamberti (1894-1970)

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Abstract. This letter is about the life and the research of an Italian psychiatrist, who had national and international reputation in the 20th century, especially for his interest in “psychosurgery”.

Key words: Mario Adamo Fiamberti, psychosurgery, transorbital leucotomy

Adamo Mario Fiamberti (1) was born in Stradella (Pavia) on the 10th september 1894. He graduated from medical school in Torino (1920) and became professor of “Clinical of Nervous and Mental Illness” in 1931. At the same time, he worked as asylum doctor. From 1921 he worked in a psychiatric hospital in Brescia for 10 years, except to a brief period spent in Verona (1927-1928). In 1932 he was named Director of Psychiatric Hospitals in Sondrio, in 1935 Director of psychiatric hospital in Vercelli and in 1937 director of Psychiatric Hospitals in Varese, where he stayed until 1964, when he retired. He died on August 31, 1970 (Feltre).

Fiamberti studied two main scientific topics: the application of acetylcholine-shock and the transorbital leucotomy in mental illness treatment.

In the first case, the studies about acetylcholine-shock were based on other scientific experiences: the insulin shock (Manfred Sakel 1932), cardiazol shock (Ladisluauus von Meduna 1936), electroconvulsive therapy (Ugo Cerletti and Lucio Bini 1938).

However, the acetylcholine-shock therapy did not excite much interest and the psychiatrists abandoned soon this biological approach.

Instead, the studies about leucotomy had more results. In 1936, Antonio Caetano Egas Moniz published the results of frontal lobe surgery in the psychosis treatment. He made some cranial holes to reach

the prefrontal lobe with a leukotome. With this instrument, he destroyed the connections in the prefrontal white matter, obtaining an improvement of psychotic symptoms. This surgical approach was tried out and used in the treatment of severe mental disorders, especially behavioural disorders and acute agitation. In 1949, Moniz received a Nobel Prize in Medicine for his researches about psychosurgical procedures (3).

Although Fiamberti studies were based on Moniz approach, he was searching for a procedure more simple than cranial perforation. He performed the operation forcing the leukotome through the bony orbit at the back of the eye, as well as in the cerebral ventriculography. Fiamberti designed and made a special leukotome, which cut the nervous fibres with a golden leaf (4). The Fiamberti technique was largely practised and appreciated, until it was discovered by an American Neurologist: Walter Jackson Freeman II, who modified and improved the surgical technique, naming it “lobotomy” (5).

The neuro-surgical treatments of mental illness were used for more than two decades, exciting scientific and media (articles, novels, films) interest (6). However, in the 1950s, the use of these procedures decreased dramatically and numerous countries banned it. Many reasons caused this change: the lack of strong scientific evidences, the numerous and severe side effects, but above all the introduction of psychotropic drugs.

Nevertheless, we remember Mario Adamo Fiamberti as an important clinician and researcher in the area of mental disorders and their treatment.

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