

CENTRIFUGING MENTAL PATIENTS

A look back at twisting approaches to treating mental ailments

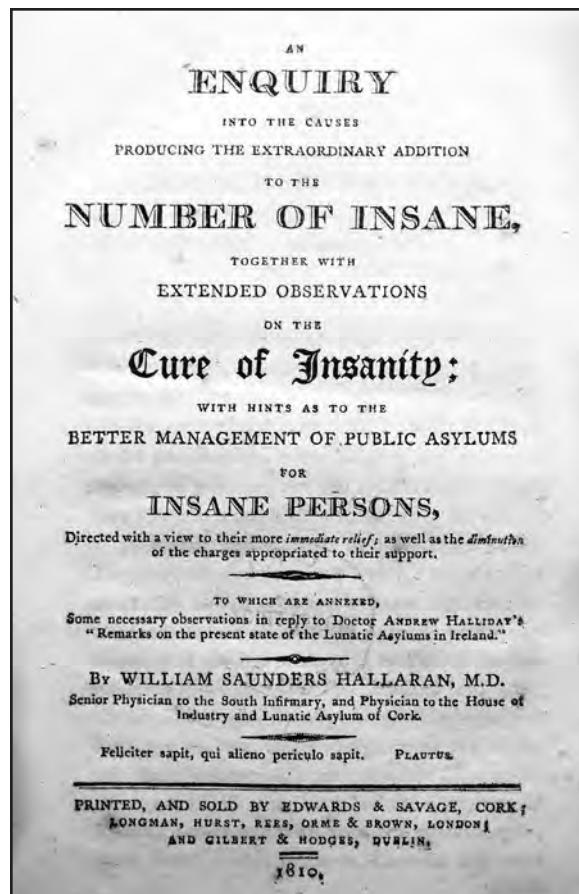
by Nan Swift, *Improbable Research* staff

Medical professionals, some of them, have tried using centrifugal force to treat and possibly cure their mental patients. Here are glances at a few of those attempts.

Halloran's Spinning Swing

“Hallaran’s Circulating Swing,” Caoimhghín S. Breathnach, *History of Psychiatry*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2010, pp. 79–84. The author, at University College Dublin, explains:

William Saunders Hallaran (c.1765–1825) was physician superintendent at the County and City of Cork Lunatic Asylum for 40 years, where he distinguished between mental insanity and organic (systemic) delirium. In treatment he used emetics and purgatives, digitalis and opium, the shower bath and exercise, and argued that patients should be saved from “unavoidable sloth” by mental as well as manual occupation. However, it is as an exponent of the circulating swing, proposed by Erasmus Darwin and used by Joseph Cox, that he is remembered. His best results were achieved, as he recorded in *An Enquiry [into... the Number of Insane {and} the Cure of Insanity]* in 1810, by inducing sleep in mania of recent onset, but perhaps his most enduring observation was that some of his patients enjoyed the rotatory experience, and he had enough sense to allow the use of the swing as a mode of amusement.



ABOVE: The cover page of William Hallaran's book in which he depicts the chair for treating the insane.

LEFT: William Hallaran's chair for treating the insane, as depicted in his book.

Nineteenth Century Patient-Spinning

“Centrifuge ‘Therapy’ for Psychiatric Patients in Germany in the Early 1800s,” Viktor Harsch, *Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2006, pp. 157–60. The author, at the Aeromedical Center Trossenhausen, Neubrandenburg, Meck-Pomm, Germany, explains:

In 1818, Dr. Ernst Horn (1774–1848) reported miraculous cures for patients suffering from hysteria through the use of centrifuges at the psychiatric wards of the Charité-Hospital in Berlin during the previous decade. In his book, *Public Account Concerning My 12 years’ Service as Second Physician of the Royal Hospital in Berlin, Including Experiences from Hospitals and Mental Institutions*, a full description of the indications and methods for treatment of mental illness, including technical data and construction costs for a rotating bed and rotating chair, is given. The rotating bed was turned by a crankshaft connected by ropes to a capstan. Slowing or stopping was achieved by tensing a rope around a wheel near the ceiling. With a diameter of 13 ft, this therapeutic instrument was capable of producing up to 4 to 5 Gs in the head region.

A Stance on Cox’s Chair

“Cox’s Chair: ‘A Moral and a Medical Mean in the Treatment of Maniacs,’ ” Nicholas J. Wade, Ulf Norrsell, and A. Presly, *History of Psychiatry*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2005, pp. 73–88. The authors, at the University of Dundee, U.K., and Göteborg University, Sweden, explain:

Two hundred years ago Joseph Cox published his book on the treatment of insanity. His novel technique was rotating the body in a specially designed chair. Initially modest and later extravagant claims were made for the therapeutic benefit of “Cox’s chair.” It was widely adopted in Europe in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but lost favour thereafter. Its benefits have proved to be scientific rather than medical because it was adopted by students of the senses to investigate vertigo; a century later it re-emerged as the Bárány chair for the clinical assessment of vestibular function.

Detail from the study “Cox’s Chair: ‘A Moral and a Medical Mean in the Treatment of Maniacs.’ ”

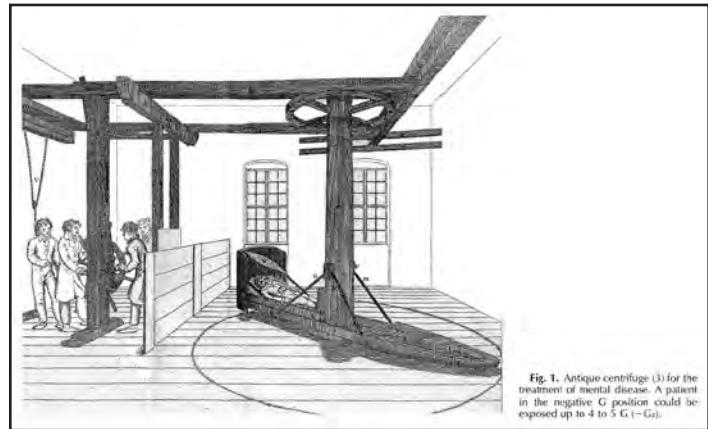


Fig. 1. Antique centrifuge (1) for the treatment of mental disease. A patient in the negative G position could be exposed up to 4 to 5 G ($-G_z$).

Detail from Victor Harsch’s treatise on old German methods of using centrifugal force to treat mental patients.

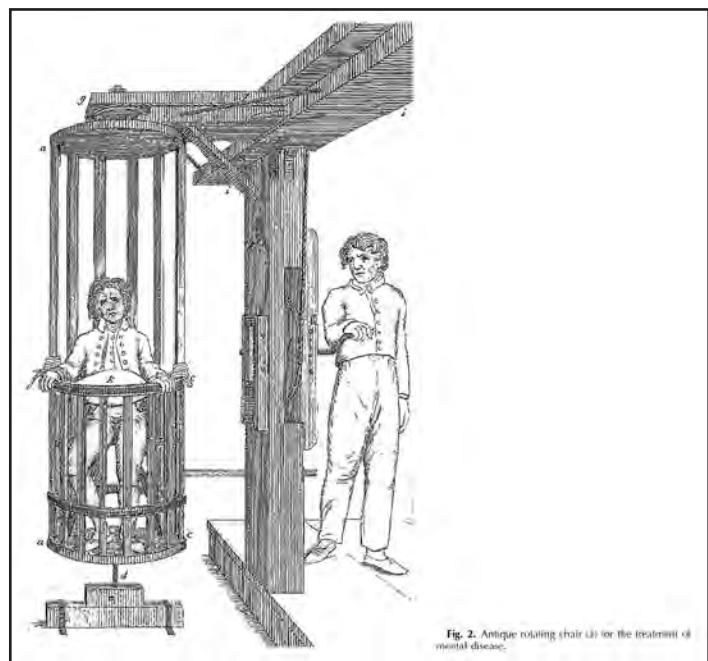


Fig. 2. Antique rotating chair (2) for the treatment of mental disease.

Further detail from Harsch’s treatise on old German methods.



N. J. WADE ET AL.: COX’S CHAIR

FIG. 2. A photograph of Cox’s chair in the Hospital museum at Vadstena, together with a model of the chair (The photographs were kindly taken by Sven-Ola Svensson, curator of the museum.)