

Writer's Cramp:

A little known disease

Mr. Bakshi's face wears a worried look as he approaches the bank. His daughter's marriage is round the corner and he has come to withdraw a large amount of money. Yet this is not what troubles him. Perplexedly he feels the numbness of his right hand. It hasn't improved one bit: With the ominous thought that his signature would not tally with the 'specimen' kept with the banker, Mr Bakshi enters the bank. Nervously walking up to the counter, he picks up a pen to sign the cheque. His hands tremble. The cheque is dishonoured. The signatures do not



Difficulty in writing: Writers Cramp.

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It is seen that Writers Cramp prevails across the wide horizon of professions from peons to pro-

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fessors. In a developing country like India the incidence of Writers Cramp is more evident as the

Writers Cramp is a little known disease resulting in an inability to write legibly. Because of the limited knowledge about the disease and its treatment more and more people affected by it are being totally decapacitated. Dr Naug, a noted clinical physiologist at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, has been doing excellent work to rectify the inability to write properly through behavioural techniques.

match. In vain Mr. Bakshi tries to explain to the counter-clerk. But there is no convincing the clerk about his own identity. Again and again Mr. Bakshi tries to sign. But the signatures are inconsistent.

Mr Bakshi's mind was in a quandary. For ten years he had been undergoing medical treatment through drugs, but without success. Finally, he was referred to Dr Ram Manohar Lohia (Willingdon) Hospital's Behaviour Therapy Unit. Dr Naug, a noted clinical psychologist treated him. Mr Bakshi was one of the thousand cases treated by Dr Naug for an unusual disease called 'Writers Cramp'. Now, Mr Bakshi goes to the bank with much more confidence.

"Writers Cramp is characterised

as a difficulty in executing movements of fingers, wrist, forearm and arm required in writing. Painful contractions of the muscle interrupt writing when attempted, or is continued for some time," explains Dr Naug. This can lead to a disruption of the normally spontaneous performance of the art of writing, so much as to make the writing illegible.

Mention of writing disorders affecting people is found in the ancient Chinese civilization. Some symptoms were seen in artists, violinists, tailors and a number of other craftsmen. Later in the nineteenth century, with the spread of education and increase in the number of professional writers, the disorder came to be known as

practice of handwriting is prevalent amongst the vast majority of our population. On the other hand, in the developed world this problem is less, as people there have various gadgets to replace handwriting.

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Dr Naug cites several examples where Writers Cramp does not affect the execution of other manual skills like playing tennis, swimming or shaving. In one case it was found that a patient could type without difficulty. However, in some cases certain skilled manual activity requiring precision finger-hand dexterity and movements may



Behavioural techniques: a time consuming exercise.

be affected. Mostly, attempts to overcome the problem of Writers Cramp by using special grips on the pen, like holding it between the index and middle fingers, changing from right to the left hand, using thick pens, ball-point pens or with grooves at the point of grip to exert pressure during writing, fail. "The Cramp quickly shifts to the left hand, or the alternated mode of writing", says Dr Naug.

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Although no direct cause is identified for Writers Cramp, world-famous psychologist Dr Fenichel is of the view that it "results from the repression of infantile sexual desire in a person having a masochistic personality".

However, one explanation which is gaining ground is that Writers Cramp is a learnt maladaptive behaviour generated and maintained by anxiety in persons who have high neuroticism as one of their personality characteristics. The application of Behavioural Treatment to modify these mal-

adaptive responses and to restore adoptive writing has shown considerable success.

People who tend to ignore the problem of Writers Cramp, and there are thousands of them, are basically in the process of being permanently disabled for their particular spheres of activity. Moreover, the common notion that it comes with age is also wrong. A school boy, Pradeep, has Writers Cramp. His teachers used to ignore his answer-sheets as they were termed illegible. So he had to stop taking his examination. With the application of behavioural techniques, the problem was solved and

he began to write legibly.

Behavioural treatment to remove the physical symptoms and to reinstate legible writing is a time-consuming exercise and often a multi-form treatment programme. This is so because most of the problem arises from learning faulty habits. Through desensitization, aversive conditioning, modelling,

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and learning the patient is brought to a normal writing situation.

Dr Naug, who is practising these modes with the blend of yogic therapy for the last two decades, says that "apparently a larger number than those who seek treatment for the disorder are present in the general population. And treatment is often sought at a late stage. It is seen that the majority of people accept it as a physical disorder and after medical treatment accept it as incurable. Even a psychological treatment of Writers Cramp is not known".

Gautam Chatopadhyay

Simple instruments used to improve legibility.

