Physician's Lexicon

The Wanderings of the Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve, sometimes called the pneumogastric nerve, is the tenth of twelve paired nerves emanating from the primate brain stem and are collectively called the cranial nerves. It is the longest and most complex of the cranial nerves. It emerges from the medulla oblongata, between the olivary nucleus and the inferior cerebellar peduncle; it then exits the infratentorial space through the jugular foramen, courses caudally through the carotid sheath and finally distributes its roots to structures in the neck, thorax and, via the diaphragm, the abdomen. About 80% of its fibers are sensory but it does innervate numerous muscles including those of the larynx and also carries parasympathetic fibers.

The phrase, vagus nerve, is derived from the Latin, nervus vagus, meaning wandering nerve. A number of other English words are also descended from the Latin, vagus, all reflecting the sense of wandering or impermanence. Thus, one encounters the word, vagabond, (a person leading a wandering, nomadic life and sometimes thought to be shiftless, irresponsible and without a permanent home); the word, vagrant, (a person with neither home not visible means of support, a wanderer); the word, vague, (something not clearly perceived or understood, something imprecise); and extravagant (spending too much; wandering beyond the bounds of fiscal reason and prudence). And the words reverie and rave are distantly related.

Still further English words trace back to the Latin, vagus. A vade mecum (literally, "go with me") defines working or instructional manuals in various occupations and avocations (in more modern vernacular, "how-to" books). Even the slang, vamoose (directly from the Spanish, vamos, meaning let us go; previously from the Latin, vadere, meaning to go, and ultimately from the Latin, vagus.)

The word, wander, however, is purely Germanic (through various north Teutonic permutations including Old English) with not a trace of Latin or Greek. The word, vandal, derives from it; and through a reverse linguistic migration then turns up in Latin as Vandals, the name that the Romans bestowed upon the pagan Germanic tribes that ravaged Spain and Gaul particularly during the Fifth Century.

The vagus nerve has been a sturdy mainstay within textbooks on neuroanatomy for centuries. No medical student could possibly consider promotion to the clinical years without knowing the distribution and sensory/motor responsibilities of this important cranial nerve. And now, with the increasing employment of the vagus nerve stimulator (VNS) as a therapeutic adjunct, the nerve has assumed even greater practical importance.

— Stanley M. Aronson, MD