

THE FIRST DESCRIPTION OF FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME BY FRENCH PEDIATRICIAN PAUL LEMOINE

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Most published papers cite Jones and Smith of Seattle as the two physicians who first described the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in their Lancet paper of 1973.¹ The truth has been different. The first paper came from a rural French pediatrician Paul Lemoine who described 15 fold more cases five years earlier, in 1968. He was unlucky in publishing his cases in an obscure French journal that does not exist any more.²

In the early 2000's we received permission from the French publisher to translate and publish Lemoine's original paper in English in the journal *Therapeutic Drug Monitoring*.³ We also received from Lemoine himself, a manuscript written in French summarizing his life experience with and thoughts about FAS which we publish here. This paper makes for amazing reading, as well, it reflects on the ways knowledge emerges, and the risks of important knowledge becoming oblivious.

Lemoine's account demonstrates how much knowledge about the toxic fetal effects of alcohol was published and known in Europe in the early 1900's, half a century before it became public knowledge and a public health issue. It also shows that Jones and Smith were in contact with Lemoine before publishing their Lancet paper. Yet they do not cite him for several years, including in their seminal paper. But Lemoine is not bitter about it. In fact, he is grateful, because no one in France believed him, whereas the Jones and Smith paper caused the needed tsunami.

In his own words: "Fortunately in 1973, Smith in Seattle, after reading the abstract of my work in the French Pediatric Archives, published 8 cases with the same conclusions. He wrote to me asking for my complete text. This is an amusing fact: the 127 cases of a modest pediatrician from Brittany did not create any interest, whereas 8 American cases became immediately convincing and the syndrome became rapidly known in France and in the world. Thanks go to Smith for being able to impose the

existence of this reality and its dramatic consequences".

Alcohol abuse is as old as humanity, and it is very evident that millions of human beings were afflicted by FAS before 1973. How could so many people "disregard the obvious" (in the words of philosopher Martin Buber) for so many years? And all that was needed was good patient history and clinical examination- not laboratory or other fancy essays.

With the hope that this example will serve us to "regard the obvious" in our scientific journey, you are invited to read Lemoine's summary of his life experience.

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3. Lemoine P, Harousseau H, Borteyru JP, Menuet JC: [Children of alcoholic parents--observed anomalies: discussion of 127 cases.](#) *Ther Drug Monit* 2003;Apr 25:132-6.