

The Ellard Collection

Practice notes

The recognition and management of werewolves

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Dr Ellard, revered former Editor of Modern Medicine of Australia and later, Medicine Today, and a distinguished psychiatrist, wrote many essays between the 1970s and early 2000s on society's most controversial and vexing issues and, on occasion, the whimsical. These were published in various journals, and some were also compiled and published as books. This essay 'The recognition and management of werewolves' originally appeared in the April 1990 issue of Modern Medicine.

The recognition and management of werewolves and medicine have been clearly associated since the first recorded medical procedures. As we have learned more, science has rightly captured the field. But those of us who care for patients know that logic and science are not quite enough.

There are few medical conditions which have appeared in the world's literature for more than two thousand years. Here we have such a disorder, which is further notable because, from time to time, serious epidemics have been reported leading to many deaths. Nevertheless most practitioners are unaware of it, and not a single case has been diagnosed in Australia.

When I was a small boy I was asked if I would like to become a wolf cub. It seemed to me that this suggestion provided conclusive proof of the madness of adults, for I knew that wolves were large dogs which hunted in packs in the Northern Hemisphere, devouring anyone unwise enough to emerge from his house in the winter. Furthermore, they sat up all night in the snow howling, as well they might under those circumstances. I knew, too, what one wolf had tried to do to Little Red Riding Hood, and another to three small pigs. To be asked to join them was a great mystery, and probably a trap: I declined as graciously as I could.

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* Ellard J. The anatomy of mirages: a psychiatrist reflects on life and the mind. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press; 1994. p. 117-125.



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A brief history of werewolves

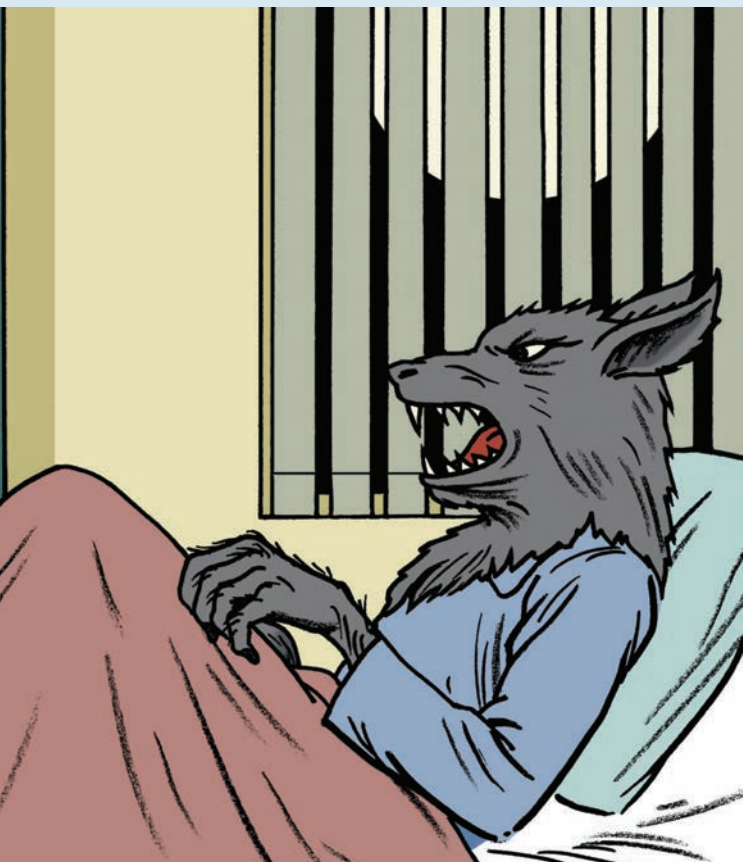
I was, of course, absolutely correct. The notion that humans can turn into wolves, and back again, has been with us for a long time. The practice is called lycanthropy, and those who do it werewolves. More generally, people have been thought to become dogs, foxes, leopards, hyenas and many other creatures as well: sometimes lycanthropy is used to describe all such activities. I have read in more than one place (for example, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹) that a belief in witch-hares persists in Somersetshire and Arran in the United Kingdom. For those who would like to try it out the appropriate incantation is:²

I shall go into a hare, With sorrow and much, and mickle care. And I shall go in the Devil's name, Aye, 'til I come home again.

I take no responsibility for the result should you make the experiment: it might be an idea to make sure that the dog is locked outside.

Every culture seems to have the man to animal transformation deeply embedded in it. Totemism comes to mind as does the shaman who in some parts of the world can transmit his spirit into an animal and then return to his own body. The word 'berserk' means 'bear clothes': the early berserkers wore bear skins. The Brigade of Guards still does: I do not know what effect the practice has on its members. Just before I began to write, I watched an Aboriginal dance group perform a dance in which they became brolgas, and I wondered if there had been a time when there was magic in it.

As a measure of the closeness between man and wolf, Robert Eisler, in a book of monumental scholarship but questionable conclusions, has pointed out that, not only the names of families, but also the names of many ancient tribes are directly derived from the word for wolf in several languages.³ There are many



reports of children reared by wolves, some believable, others apocryphal as in the case of Romulus and Remus.

Lycanthropy also occurs in Holy Writ: turn to the Book of Daniel and see what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed the sainted indulged in it as well; in the fifth century St Patrick changed the Welsh King Vereticus into a wolf and, a century later, St Natalis cursed a noble Irish family such that each member had to spend seven years as a wolf before resuming human form.⁴ These stories exist in many forms and places.

Because of the long accepted close relationship between werewolves, terror, mutilation and murder, Dr Goebbels chose to call his projected postwar underground terrorist movement by that



Figure 1. Many sufferers of lycanthropia experience an acute passion for raw meat. The lycanthrope in this nineteenth-century French print by Leonce Petit apparently hoped to appease his diabolical appetite by consuming one of the local farm yard beasts. (Taken from reference 4.)

name, thereby following the precedent of another German nationalist movement of the 1920s. I cannot bring the reference to mind but I believe that Hitler's nickname was 'wolf' and his Eastern Front headquarters were called the 'wolf lair'.

The interesting thing is that werewolves have been reported for more than 2000 years and the reports are still coming in. It is one of the oldest – perhaps the oldest – endemic psychosis, and yet it attracts little attention in the standard texts. I write of it here so that you will be able to recognise the werewolves who may attend your practice.

The first werewolf recorded in the literature appeared in Arcadia, in Central Peloponnisos. A man was sacrificed to Zeus, and his entrails became mixed with those of animals also sacrificed. Those who tasted them became wolves, at least for a time. Plato writing in about 380BC referred to it.⁵ There are several versions of the story, some stating that King Lycaon himself became a werewolf, others that two noble families were so afflicted. Fortunately, they discovered that if they crossed a particular river in one direction they became wolves, and if they crossed in the other they became human, which must have been a great relief.⁶ This was all a long while ago: King Lycaon's grandmother was Mother Earth and the Deluge happened during the life of her son, Nyktimos.⁴

This was the first epidemic: there an armed force and 150 werewolves were driven away in one action.⁶

Details of the epidemic, with cases, may be found in Calmeil.⁷ Two observations will hint at its extent. In one Department of France, Giura, a judge named Boguet stated that he had condemned some 600 people for lycanthropy,⁸ and some 30,000 cases were recorded in Europe between 1520 and 1630.² Heaven only knows what was wrong with the poor wretches: they burned in any case. The number of werewolves in the sixteenth century became burdensome indeed, and the transformation spread into the upper classes. In 1555, Olaus Magnus published a history of Sweden, *Historia De Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, which is quoted by Woodward.⁴ Magnus



Figure 2. George Sand's illustration (from his *Legendes Rustiques*, 1858), showing 'a certain wall' where 'some thousands of werewolves come together that each may try his nimbleness in leaping'. (Taken from reference 4.)



Figure 3. In this gruesome woodcut by the sixteenth-century German painter, Lucas Granach, a shaggy-haired lycanthrope has adopted the aggressive stance and predatory behaviour of the wolf he imagines himself to be. He is making off with a baby, long the favourite prey of these demented human monsters. All around lie the horribly dismembered remains of the lycanthrope's earlier expeditions.

recorded that ‘... between Lithuania, Samogitia, and Curonia, there is a certain wall left of a castle that was thrown down; to this, at a set time, some thousands of werewolves come together, that each of them may try his nimbleness in leaping. He that cannot leap over this wall, as commonly the fat ones cannot, are beaten with whips by their captains. And it is constantly affirmed that among the multitude are the great men and chiefest nobility of the land’.

It was during that epidemic that the transition from demonology to rationality gathered momentum. Liberal and critical as he was, nevertheless Bodin, writing in 1587, had no doubt that lycanthropy was a matter of sorcery.⁶ In 1615, Rhenanus had a foot in both camps: those who believed themselves to be wolves were deluded and mentally ill, but those who perceived them as wolves had had their senses overthrown by the devil.⁹

Robert Burton, writing in England a decade or two later, said that he would refer to it as ‘Madness, as most do’.¹⁰ It is worth noting that Burton listed two dozen or so authors who had written about it, so it was a matter of widespread contemporary concern. Much depended upon this debate, for werewolves were put down firmly. Thus in 1590, Peter Stubbs, a German werewolf who had terrorised a large area for a long time received the following sentence:² ‘... first to have his body laid on a wheel, and with hot burning pincers in ten several



Figure 4. Could at least some reports of werewolves have been attributable to people seeing the unfortunate victims of an hereditary genetic malfunction called hypertrichosis? Here, in a photograph taken around 1888, is Theodore Petro – the dog-man of Barnum's Circus – who was born with the disease. (Taken from reference 4.)

places to have the flesh pulled off from the bones, after that, his legges and arms to be broken with a wooden ax or hatchet; afterwards to have his head struck from his body; then to have his carcasse burned to ashes’. They burned his daughter and mistress as well.

Superstition dies hard: the last witch was decapitated on June 18, 1782, in the town of Glarus, in Switzerland.¹¹

The clinical picture

The first description known to me is that of Marcellus of Sida, a physician of the second or third century, cited by Oribasius in the fourth century, and then by Zilboorg.¹¹ Lycanthropes ‘would wander about at night in deserted places – preferably cemeteries – and howl like wolves’. Fourteen hundred years later in the seventeenth century Burton quoted his medical contemporary, Altomarus Donatus: ‘They lie hid most part all day, and go abroad at night, barking, howling at graves and deserts; they have usually hollow eyes, scabbed legs and thighs, very dry and pale, saith Altomarus’.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, Castelli's Lexicon of 1721 said that lycanthropes had ‘a pallid complexion, dry and hollow eyes, showed an extraordinary thirst and had sores on their shins caused by their frequent falls. Some of them bit people’.⁹ Burton had been careful to differentiate lycanthropy from hydrophobia; perhaps Castelli had not.

Esquirol's 1845 description is much the same. ‘These wretched beings fly from their fellow men, lie in woods, church yards and

ancient ruins and wander, howling, about the country at night. They permit their nails and beards to grow, and thus become confirmed in their deplorable conviction, by seeing themselves covered with long hair and armed with claws. Impelled by necessity or a cruel ferocity, they fall upon children, tear, slay and devour them'.¹²

Esquirol did not distinguish between lycanthropy and the syndrome of Gilles de la Tourette, for he mentions 'A distinguished lord of the Court of Louis XIV [who] experienced a disposition to bark, and was accustomed to put his head out the window to satisfy this desire'. This raises the question of how many sufferers from that condition may have come to a terrible end because of something beyond their control. We may forgive Esquirol, because de la Tourette did not describe his disease until 1885.¹³

Some additional physical signs described by Woodward are eyebrows that meet in the middle and almond-shaped, reddish finger nails.⁴ The hands are broad and the third finger on each of them is often long. Sometimes the ears are low and far back on the head; the stride is long and swinging.

Can you think of anyone like that, right now?

Current epidemiology

Since lycanthropy is endemic, cases should be being identified now: indeed they are. Obviously enough, if one does not take a complete history it will be missed, the ulcers on the shins being attributed to venous stasis, and the hirsutism to one of the more common causes. In the same way the prevalence of proctalgia fugax, sleep paralysis and autoscopy is much greater than is commonly believed. Once one starts asking about these disorders, cases turn up.

The most recent series of werewolves known to me is that recorded in the 1988 Boston survey.¹⁴ Since occasional werewolves turned up both in their practices and the literature,^{15,16} the authors kept careful watch over a period of 12 years in a private hospital in Boston and identified 12 cases. They used the term 'lycanthropy' in the broader sense to encompass all human to animal transformations. Their bag included two wolves, two dogs, one tiger, one gerbil, one bird and two creatures that defied identification. Neuroleptics caused most of them, but not all, to resume their more normal manifestations. In an emergency, if the patient cannot be persuaded to take neuroleptics one might try more traditional methods. It is said that calling the werewolf by his Christian name three times will produce a permanent reversion. If this fails, or if you do not happen to know his Christian name, try a sprig of mistletoe and, in desperate circumstances, a silver dagger may be helpful. Exorcism is recommended, but takes time.

It seems inescapable that there must be lycanthropes roaming Australia undetected. I would be grateful for reports from readers; this is one occasion upon which one should not shrink from crying wolf.

A note on vampires

Vampires differ from werewolves, but they too are still abroad. The most notorious recent case was that of John George Haigh,

Company Director of Onslow Park Hotel, South Kensington, London, who was executed for his failings on August 15, 1949.

He murdered nine people so that he could drink their blood: he drank his own urine as well, but vampires do not usually do that. Fritz Harman, the Hanover Vampire, killed some 24 adolescent males in this century: there are many more cases in the literature.

Those who wish to keep a look out for vampires should consult Herschel Prins' article in which he discusses vampirism, its possible association with porphyria and offers a fourfold classification of its varie ties.¹⁷ He does not mention the reputed efficacy of garlic and crucifixes in subduing vampires, but it might be worth having some close to hand nevertheless.

Conclusion

Lycanthropy is probably the oldest endemic psychosis with the longest recorded history. There have been epidemics in the past and there may be more in the future. No practitioner can be confident that he or she will not be consulted by a werewolf, and it is prudent to be aware of the clinical signs and the management to succeed. **MT**

Postscript

Some time after writing this article, its author found himself in Arcadia, in the Peloponnesian peninsula of Greece. He saw where Pan had terrified people so much that the word 'panic' is still in our language but, in spite of constant vigilance, not one werewolf did he see. Two wolves encountered in the Botanical Gardens in Athens remained wolves obdurately. This was something of a disappointment.

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Readers with a particular interest in werewolves are directed towards Ian Woodward's book listed above.