

PSYCHIATRY

Twins Human Calendars

The amazing ability of two mentally retarded twins to calculate days, weeks and months as far ahead as 3500 A.D. was described to the American Psychiatric Association meeting.

► CHARLES AND GEORGE are two 24-year-old identical twins who cannot add two and two but can easily name the day, week and month as far ahead as 3500 A.D.

These "idiot savants," a phenomenon long known to psychiatrists, were described to the American Psychiatric Association meeting in Los Angeles by Drs. William A. Horwitz, Lissy Jarvik, Clarice Kestenbaum and Ethel Person of the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Charles and George have IQ's in the 60-70 range and only one year of schooling in a hospital. Despite these handicaps, their calculation span extends much farther ahead and backward than any known perpetual calendar and ranges over a much longer period than any other "calendar calculator" heretofore reported to psychiatrists.

Charles and George do not know the difference between the Julian and the Gregorian calendars, but if allowance is made for the difference, which is now 13 days, they can identify dates before 1582, when the discrepancy was 10 days.

Even though they cannot add, subtract, multiply or divide, they know which year is leap year, and which century years are not leap years.

They have a remarkable memory for some dates, and can even recall if the weather was sunny, cloudy or rainy.

They correctly recall that George Washington was born in 1732 and died in 1799. Though they cannot subtract, they say that he died at the age of 67 and would have been 232 years old were he living today.

When asked in what years April 21 falls on a Sunday, they instantly give a series of years that are correct. When asked what months in the year 2002 will begin on a Friday, they correctly answer March, February and November.

Charles and George were born to a successful, self-made businessman and his wife, but the home atmosphere was a tempestuous one that involved alcohol and threats of divorce.

As infants, the twins were "good babies," but when they were three years old, a pediatrician told the mother they were retarded. George's special ability with dates was noticed at age six, while Charles' interest along these lines developed later.

Dr. Horwitz pointed out that accepted theories attempting to explain the "idiot savant" phenomenon are these:

1. Such individuals have an unusual capacity for vivid mental images.

2. The skill represents a mechanism for using memory and repetition as a substitute compensation for normal learning.

3. There is a specialized computer-like mechanism in the brains of these individuals.

What do Charles and George themselves

say of their phenomenal ability to calculate calendar dates?

Their answers: "I know" or "it's in my head."

"After exploring their abilities with various people in different learned fields, psychiatrists, psychologists, internists and mathematicians, we must candidly admit that we have no better explanation," said Dr. Horwitz.

"Previous explanations must again be questioned. We hope to indicate that other factors, probably beyond our present knowledge, must be better understood before we have a better explanation than do the 'idiot savants' themselves."

• Science News Letter, 85:343 May 30, 1964

Changing Public Image

► THE PUBLIC IMAGE of the psychiatrist has changed from a somewhat eccentric father-figure with a central European background to that of a brisk, efficient business man.

Dr. Henry A. Davidson, superintendent of the Essex County Overbrook Hospital in Cedar Grove, N. J., reached this conclusion

by studying newspaper and magazine cartoons for 15 years.

He described his findings at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association.

"Cartoons collected in 1948 to 1949 generally portrayed the psychiatrist as bearded, cigar-smoking and somewhat assertive," Dr. Davidson said.

"In cartoons collected in 1963 it is apparent that the psychiatrist has become thoroughly Americanized. He is almost never bearded, and is more likely to be smoking a pipe or a cigarette in a holder.

"There is also more emphasis on the financial or even commercial aspects of the relationship. In neither 1948 nor 1963 was there any reference to any kind of psychiatric treatment other than psychotherapy. In both years nearly all psychiatrists' offices were equipped with couches."

In his studies, Dr. Davidson also found that general practitioners were critical of psychiatrists. The most common complaint was that psychiatrists limited their services to people "sophisticated enough to understand psychotherapy, affluent enough to pay for it, and healthy enough not to need hospital care."

Dr. Davidson expressed the hope that organized psychiatry and trail blazers in psychiatric education would have "the imagination, ingenuity and motivation to improve this specific difficulty, and erase the less happy colorations in the image of the psychiatrist."

• Science News Letter, 85:343 May 30, 1964

Auto 'Accidents' Suicides

► "SUICIDE BY AUTOMOBILE" and "homicide by automobile" are attempted more frequently than generally is recognized, Dr. John M. MacDonald of the University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver, told the American Psychiatric Association meeting.

"The person who plans to take his own life on the highway may wish to prevent the discovery of suicide so as to protect his family from disgrace or to guarantee payment of his life insurance," Dr. MacDonald said.

"The person intent on homicide decreases the likelihood of detection and punishment by simulating the accidental death of his victim."

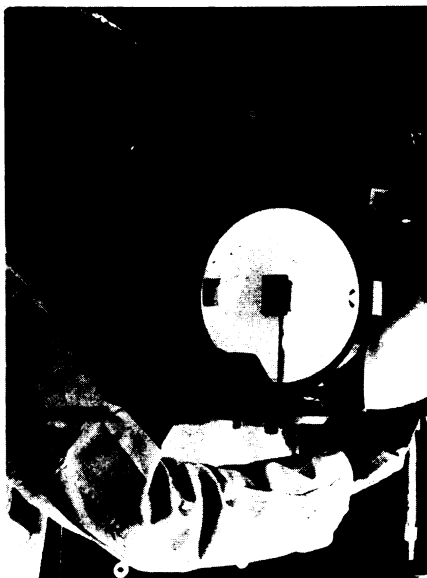
He pointed out that official statistics may not always reveal the extent of deliberate death on the highway.

In a three-month period in Colorado, 62 drivers were blamed for accidents that caused either their own deaths or the deaths of others. Three of the drivers were former patients of the Colorado Psychopathic Hospital and all died under circumstances which suggested suicide.

"Psychiatric evaluation and early treatment of persons who attempt to take life on the highway is extremely desirable," said Dr. MacDonald.

"All police officers and hospital surgeons should be alert to signs of this problem, and automobile accidents should not be quickly dismissed as being due to alcohol, sleep or loss of control at high speed."

• Science News Letter, 85:343 May 30, 1964



General Dynamics

METAL REFLECTIVITY IN SPACE
—Testing for reflectivity of metals and materials for space use is Richard Gillson, engineering assistant at the astronautics division of General Dynamics Corporation, San Diego. Light that strikes a metal specimen is reflected to a spectrometer which records reflected light intensity.