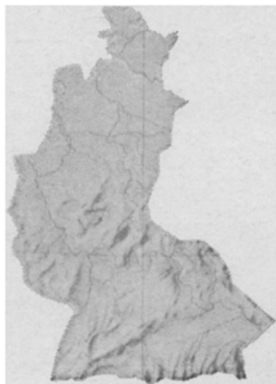


LETTER FROM FRANKFURT



Operation to relieve perversion

Brain surgery, doctors say, can lead to social recovery for disturbed homosexuals

by Ted Shoemaker

Basic research into the nature and treatment of homosexuality is under way in the United States (SN: 12/13, p. 557), but the phenomenon is still highly puzzling. Although most researchers consider homosexuality a psychological pattern of behavior rather than a physical or constitutional ailment, many homosexuals do not respond to psychological therapy. Recently, a team of doctors in Goettingen has been claiming good success in treating pedophilic homosexuals by brain operations.

Since 1962, doctors under the direction of Prof. Hans Orthner of the University Department of Neurology at Goettingen have operated on seven men who suffered from a compulsive urge to molest boys. Dr. Orthner states that most of the patients have been relieved of their tendencies. "None," he says, "have lapsed into their former perversions."

The operation is still highly controversial. Medically it is a potentially dangerous procedure; from a moral standpoint, it has been criticized because its effects are similar to those of castration.

All the patients who consented to the operation were in extreme social, and often legal, difficulties because of their pedophilia. The first man to receive the operation, for example, had already served three jail terms for morals offenses, and had been declared a public menace by the courts. He was diagnosed as a psychopathic homosexual with egocentric behavior, autistic-schizophrenic traits and a complete lack of insight into his psychological situation. His electroencephalogram readings were abnormal, moreover. Doctors believed it very unlikely that his condition would yield to psychotherapy and that, under the circumstances, the risks of the operation and of the possible side effects were justified.

The operation itself consists of destroying, by electric shock, a portion of the right ventromedial nucleus. This nucleus is the less dominant of the two centers in the hypothalamus that apparently regulate the sexual urge.

It has been known for some time that operations on the hypothalamus in animals result in an inhibition of sexual behavior. In humans, any large lesion of the hypothalamus can lead to serious side effects, such as disturbances in the body's temperature regulation and its ability to control urine secretion. Therefore, says Dr. Orthner,

"we operate only on a very small area."

The area for surgery and probe positioning is determined with X-rays. A probe with an electrode is sunk into the brain, with targeting and monitoring continued by X-rays. The patient remains conscious during the operation and his reactions are checked regularly as a precaution. Once the target area in the hypothalamus is reached, it is coagulated with an electric charge.

The side effects of the operation appear gratifyingly small, so far. One patient has experienced a minor but remarkable disturbance of his visual memory: He is unable to recall the finer details of pictures and cannot remember his mother's face clearly, even though he sees her frequently. Another patient showed an abnormal secretion of hormones in his urine as a side effect.

For the most part, Dr. Orthner says, the side effects are "very, very small." The Goettingen doctors feel that their brain operation is far preferable to castration. The removal of the gonads in castration, they point out, leads to nervous instability, depressive moods and feelings of inferiority in 30 percent of the cases. The hypothalamus operation permits the gonadal functions to continue normally.

To date all the patients have been male, since few female perverts seem to regard their condition as a grave threat to their behavior or social position. The doctors stress that the improvement brought about by the operation is what they call a "social recovery." This means essentially that the patient is able to stay out of trouble after his operation and functions better in society. He may or may not find himself attracted to members of the opposite sex, but in any case his sexual drive is diminished, and thus manageable.

The Goettingen operation is still experimental and is not in use in the United States. Because it affects potency, it is doubtful that it will be widely employed at any time. Some researchers feel that further studies will show the operation reduces aggressive drives as well as sexual ones; such a finding would increase the reluctance of most doctors to make use of the technique. Nevertheless, Dr. Orthner believes the operation is valuable in extreme cases, and certainly is preferable to castration.

Dr. Orthner plans to continue work with the operation, to learn more about its long-term effects.