

Correspondence

On Serious Violence During Sleep-Walking

DEAR SIR,

I write to supplement the article by Professor Ian Oswald and Dr John Evans (*Journal*, December 1985, 147, 688–691). The authors refer to a case in which a lady who stabbed her husband fifteen times was freed at Preston Crown Court. They note that psychiatric evidence was offered but are unable to give details. I saw the lady in February 1978 on two occasions and was helped in assessing her by Dr John H. Evans, (Consultant Neurologist). I have also been able to make follow-up enquiries about her for this letter.

She was 32 at the time, had been happily married for ten years and had two young children. She had worked as a civil servant until five years before the episode.

There was no significant previous medical or psychiatric history. She and her husband had both been in the civil service when they met, but she had retired five years before to have her children. Her husband was a heavy sleeper and for four years before the offence she had been in the habit of shaking him at night to wake him. This had started when she had wanted him to get up to look after their daughter. She had hit him quite hard in her sleep on several previous occasions.

She had not been sleeping well for five days before the attack because she had a cough. She had been waking at about 5 a.m. On the morning of the attack, she went downstairs wearing slacks and a sweater and she peeled some potatoes. She then cut them up with a knife in order to make chips. She came upstairs with the knife and went to sleep on the bed next to her husband. At about 8 o'clock, she woke to find her husband saying, "Look what the hell you've done". She had stabbed him in a quite random way in three different areas—the right anterior chest, the left lower back and the lateral aspect of the left thigh. She called the ambulance herself and her husband was taken to hospital and she was charged with assault.

There seemed to be no conscious reason for her to have stabbed her husband. When interviewed with intravenous Methedrine and Sodium Amytal, still no psychogenesis for the attack emerged. She was admitted to hospital and fasted for two days. After

this fast, her electroencephalogram was recorded and a blood sugar was taken. Both of these investigations were normal.

When she appeared in Court the couple came together and the judge accepted that what happened had been something of which she had no conscious awareness. He directed that the charges should lie on the file.

Eight years later, the couple have moved. They are still together happily and there has been no recurrence of this behaviour. These further details show that the case fits in very well with those recorded by Professor Oswald and Dr Evans and that in fact serious violence can occur in sleep of which the conscious mind is not later aware.

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DEAR SIR,

The article by Oswald and Evans (*Journal*, December 1985, 147, 688–691) is of considerable interest and puts me in mind of a case in Victoria concerning a mother charged with the murder of her 19 year old daughter when the defence of sleep-walking (automatism) was successfully raised (*R vs Cogdon* (1950), Supreme Court, Melbourne, unreported, but see Morris (1951)).

The facts were that the mother and daughter, Pat, were agreed by all to have had a very good relationship. That the night before the death the mother dreamt that their house was full of spiders and that these spiders were crawling all over Pat. In her sleep the mother left her bed, entered Pat's room and awoke to find herself violently brushing at Pat's face. Pat awoke and her mother stated she was just tucking her in. At the trial the mother stated that she still believed that spiders were being bred by the occupants of a nearby house. The mother also stated that she dreamt of ghosts and had said to one "Well you have come to take Pattie". A final worry of the mother was with concern for the Korean War. On the night of the killing the mother dreamt that "the war was all round the house", that soldiers were in Pat's room, and that one soldier was on the