

was banned in July 1999 following its declaration by Chinese authorities as a religious cult in passive rebellion to the Government. *Falun Gong* is a traditional spiritual discipline that has its roots in ancient Chinese culture. It draws on Buddhism, Taoism and the traditional Chinese doctrine of *Qigong* and involves gentle exercise and meditation. The crack-down against even private practice of the meditative exercise has resulted in over 600 detentions in psychiatric hospitals, where sedative and antipsychotic medications have been routinely and forcibly administered, along with electroconvulsive therapy (Ahmad, 2000) in an attempt to make practitioners renounce their beliefs.

Amnesty International is concerned that such forced incarceration will escalate as the authorities attempt to discredit *Falun Gong* and to brand its practitioners as 'crazy'. The spurious diagnosis of 'Qigong-induced mental disorder' has even been described by some Chinese psychiatrists who claim obsessional symptoms, paranoid ideation, anxiety and depression as its core features. Other human rights violations, such as torture and ill treatment in custody, have resulted in a mounting death toll, currently standing at 77 according to Amnesty International (2001).

Attempts have been made this year by the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on the Abuse of Psychiatry

and Psychiatrists to encourage the World Psychiatric Association to undertake a review of these alleged wrongful detentions. The failure of even a proportion of Chinese psychiatrists to function within an articulated ethical framework along generally acknowledged international standards diminishes all of us practising in the arena of mental health.

**Ahmad, K. (2000)** International concern grows over psychiatric abuses in China. *Lancet*, **356**, 920.

**Amnesty International (2001)** News review – China crackdown. *Amnesty*, 105, January/February, 11.

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## One hundred years ago

### The role of consanguinity in the etiology of epilepsy, hysteria, idiocy, and imbecility

A contribution of interest on the above subject appears in a recent *Thèse de Paris* (1900) by Dr. Theophile Gillet of Paris, dealing with the results of consanguineous marriages in relation to certain neuroses and psychoses. Dr. Rilliet and Dr. Barthez in their classical "Treatise on the Diseases of Children" (1859) had stated that the results of consanguinity of parents were as follows. First, fewer births; secondly, more miscarriages and still births than the average; thirdly, weakness (physical and moral) of the surviving children; fourthly, a special tendency in the offspring to diseases of the nervous system, such as epilepsy, idiocy and imbecility, deaf-mutism, and local cerebral palsies; and lastly, a special proclivity in the offspring to tuberculous degeneracy. It has since been stated that among the more frequent results of consanguinity in the parents are such abnormalities as albinism, deaf-mutism, and

retinitis pigmentosa in the offspring, even in cases where but one parent showed the specific morbid taint. The observations of Dr. Gillet were made at the Bicêtre during 11 years (from 1889 to 1900), during which period 1228 children were under care and treatment. Inquiries were also made into the histories of 425 girl patients at the Fondation Vallée, Paris, an institution for children suffering from nervous diseases. The total number of cases investigated was, therefore, 1653. Inquiries into the family histories of these patients elicited the fact that there were 45 instances of consanguineous marriage in the parents. These 45 families were minutely studied, with the result that the offspring of these families taken *en bloc* showed 19 cases of idiocy, 14 of epilepsy (idiopathic or symptomatic), eight of imbecility, three of hydrocephalus, one of chorea, and one of idiocy [*sic*], a total of 46 grave neuroses and cerebral defects. The relative degrees of consanguinity were as follows. In 28 instances the father and mother were first cousins, in nine they were the children of

first cousins, in seven instances they were cousins of the third, fourth, and fifth degree, and in one case uncle and niece. Inquiry into the condition of their children during infancy revealed the fact that convulsions and meningitis were notably prevalent, while idiocy or imbecility and chorea were also found to prevail in an abnormally high degree. Taking the total of all the surviving children of these consanguineous marriages it appeared that 2.7 per cent of them suffered from idiocy, epilepsy, imbecility, hysteria, or other grave cerebral disorders – a proportion very much larger than that generally present among the offspring of those in the same rank of life but who had not contracted consanguineous marriages.

### REFERENCE

*Lancet*, 22 December 1900, 1822–1823.

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