

# Aphasia Insights!

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“I have attempted to blaze a track through the jungle, but make no pretence at having reached the end of the journey. I can only hope that some ardent and adventurous spirit may follow in my path and find that my labours have helped him to the solution of the profoundly interesting and difficult problems of disorders of speech.”

**Head, Henry. Aphasia and Kindred Disorders of Speech, Vol. I & Vol. 2 (1926). Cambridge at the University Press, pp.x.**

Aphasia Nation, Inc. is committed to educating the wider public about stroke and aphasia and the “*Aim High for Aphasia!*” international Aphasia Awareness campaign.

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## Sir Henry Head: *Regeneration & Aphasia and the Kindred Disorders of Speech.*

By Tom Broussard, Ph.D.

This is the next in a series of articles about the science and scientists behind the brain, stroke, aphasia, plasticity and recovery.

**Sir Henry Head, M.D., LL.D. Edin., F.R.S. (4 August 1861 – 8 October 1940)** was an English neurologist who had a busy, hardworking and complex life; as a teacher, a physician, a researcher of pain sensations and aphasia, as well as a loving husband, and a poet.



**Sir Henry Head (1861-1940)**

He was born in Stoke Newington (a district of London) and died with the cause of death being broncho-pneumonia and paralysis agitans ([Parkinson's disease](#)) ([Wikipedia](#)).

Many of Henry's siblings were also successful in their own fields: Francis Head joined Lloyd's as an insurance broker alongside his father (Henry Head) and became the director of Henry Head and Co. but died young.

Christopher Head, mayor of Chelsea from 1909 to 1911, took over after Francis's death until his own death onboard the RMS Titanic (Ticket #113038, Cabin B-11) in 1912. He went down with the ship and his body was never found (Ticehurst, 1912).

Henry Head joined University College Hospital, London and became a doctor in 1890. He worked as a house physician under Dr. Thomas Buzzard, who had been approved by [John Hughlings Jackson](#) in 1867 and to whom, Head had him in highest regard

as one of “the most remarkable pioneers in this field of research” (Head, 1926, pp. 30).

Head also knew Charles Sherrington. They corresponded regularly on similar issues and Head sent one of his poems, [Finding the Ideal Patient \(pp. 150-1\)](#) to Sherrington in 1915.

Sherrington (1878), Jackson (1884), Head (1921) and [Gordon Holmes](#) (1922) (a colleague of Head's) each presented the Croonian Lecture. Holmes wrote Head's obituary as well (Holmes, 1941).

He was a teacher and a physician and good at both, as he would tell you. That was his strength and his weakness. Once he said that he had read a book that didn't exist. Another time, he hoped for a promotion that he didn't get and wrote in his diary that “Medical education in England

suffers from the fact that the great hospitals are manned by practitioners of medicine who sometimes teach, instead of by professors of that science who occasionally practice" (Brain, 1961).

Head's sense of the dramatic occurred when he was listening to a woman's heart with his class around him. Without warning, the patient threw her arms around Head and kissed him. Without any hesitation, Head turned to his students and said with a gesture, "typical, gentlemen, typical" ([Sir Henry Head](#)).

As he studied sensory nerves while treating his patients, he found it was difficult to get accurate accounts of their sensations. He decided to study himself as a test subject with the psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers.

In April 1903, Dr. Sherren cut and reconnected two sensory nerves on his left forearm. The [regeneration](#) of his nerves was charted over the next four years (Rivers, 1908).

Henry Head married [Mary Ruth Mayhew](#) (1866–1939) in 1904 and they were extremely well-suited. But with his work at the hospital and her time as an author of several books and novels, they didn't see each other for months at a time.

They didn't have any children but started writing a [commonplace book](#). Each had a copy and they would exchange when they visited so that they would be able to see and comment on how their lives were unfolding.

During WWI, Head treated patients with brain injuries in London, studying their speech deficits and

aphasia. Shortly after the war, his Parkinson's symptoms had started and he retired from the hospital in 1919. But he was still mentally alert and delivered his [Croonian Lecture](#), edited the medical journal [Brain](#) from 1910 to 1925, and wrote [Aphasia and Kindred Disorders of Speech](#) (1926) regarding the clinical and symptomatic aspects of aphasia (Holmes, 1941).

Head learned from [Sherrington's integration action](#) and [Jackson's power of clinical observation](#) to express that "behind every conscious act lie many integrations most of which take place on a purely [physiological](#) level" where it is almost impossible to "unravel that vast mass of dispositions which lie normally outside the field of consciousness" (Head, 1926, pp. 533).

He did not intend that "integration" meant that "a series of factors are summed algebraically" but that "each physiological level of the organism reacts anew to its environmental conditions, and the character of the response depends not only on the reactive significance of the impulse on the state of the receptive centre" (Head, 1926, pp. 504).

As Head finished his work with aphasia and his disease progressed, his friend, Dr. George Riddoch, wrote, "we discussed the situation together. With his practical philosophy he accepted it at once .... With his excellent health he well knew what he had to face—long years of steadily increasing physical disablement, with his mind unimpaired ... in the grip of a relentless foe" (Holmes, 1941, pp. 684/5).

His final wish was the 'advancement in England of the science of medicine in the widest sense' and left his fortune to the Royal Society (Holmes, 1941, pp. 686).

Signed: *The Johnny Appleseed of Aphasia Awareness*

The author is a three-time stroke survivor and aphasia. He could not read, write or speak well and it took him years to recover.

He is Founder and President, Aphasia Nation, Inc., a non-profit organization whose mission is educating the wider public, national and international, about aphasia and plasticity, the foundation of all learning.

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