

EDITORIAL

Jules Angst, Guest editor

Special issue: Social Phobia

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Although the formal diagnostic category of social phobia was only recently introduced (Marks and Gelder 1966; DSM-III, APA 1980), the basic phenomenology of this syndrome was described more than a century ago (Casper 1846; Janet 1903). Provision of standardized operational criteria in both the ICD-10 (1993) and DSM-IV (1994) has facilitated international research on the epidemiology, course and treatment of this condition. There is wide variation in the prevalence rates of social phobia in community surveys; however, methodological differences preclude the deviation of aggregate rates across studies. Nevertheless, social phobia is a fairly common condition, which usually begins in adolescence and may in part become chronic over time. Despite the availability of efficacious treatments for social phobia, only a small minority of social phobics seek treatment, particularly those with pure social phobia. Those social phobics who do enter treatment generally seek help for a comorbid condition such as depression or alcoholism. The magnitude of comorbidity of social phobia with other anxiety disorders, affective disorders and substance abuse is quite large.

The search for the causes of social phobia include studies of genetic transmission and biological research regarding underlying brain mechanisms. Considerable progress has been made in all of these areas. Treatment strategies include behavioural therapy and the prescription of different classes of drugs, suggesting an involvement of the serotonergic system.

Through the World Psychiatric Association under the leadership of Costa e Silva, an educational programme on social phobia is now under development. The aims are to provide education at an international level about a condition that occurs across all cultures and is the source of great disability, and to provide doctors and the general public with the necessary knowledge and therapeutic skills for the treatment of this condition.

In October 1993, a special symposium on social phobia was held during a meeting of the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology in Budapest. This special issue, based on the presentations from this meeting, provides an overview of the present state of interdisciplinary research on this condition.

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Jules Angst (✉)
Psychiatric University Hospital Zürich,
P. O. Box 68, CH-8029 Zürich, Switzerland