

A Look at Eating Disorders in the British Medical History of India

by Jaclyn Kerr

I. Introduction

When deciding what topic to focus my analysis on for this project, I wanted to introduce some of the ideas I explored in some of my previous literature courses. One course I took covered representations of image and appetite in literature, and it was through this course that I developed an interest in how texts dealt with depictions of eating disorders. The data we've been allowed access to for this project is taken from the National Library of Scotland's [Medical History of British India](#), spanning records from around 1850 to 1920.

This collection is made up of 'official publications varying from short reports to multi-volume histories related to disease, public health and medical research.' With respect to mental health, it's stated on their website that the medical history contains '[o]fficial asylum records' which serve to 'highlight the colonial context of psychiatry in British India and colonial ideas about the native body.' Therefore, going into this analysis I decided that investigating whether the records contained any reference to eating disorders would be an interesting topic to look into further.

As a basis, an eating disorder is a mental health condition which covers any prolonged habit of abnormal eating. Currently, there are numerous classifications of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and binge eating disorder to name a few, but given the scope of my analysis, I will primarily be focusing on anorexia. When I performed a search using the text analysis software [AntConc](#), I received a

total of 44 hits for *anorexia*.

II. Analysis

The fact that the search returned any results to me was surprising initially, as going into this, I wasn't expecting to find any mention due to the stigma associated with eating disorders that is still an issue today.

What I found interesting was that 17 of these hits were actually in reference to anorexia in animals; while the other 23 were referring to humans who were patients in mental health asylums or hospitals. These 23 results – covering a total of 9 files – were taken from official reports on mental health asylums in India, detailing patient symptoms and causes of death. After reading through the context of these results, I want to introduce an important distinction I found between the terms 'anorexia' and 'anorexia nervosa.'

Nowadays, when people use the term anorexia, they are usually referring to anorexia nervosa. The [Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine](#) defines anorexia nervosa as 'an eating disorder consisting of loss of appetite due to emotional states, such as anxiety, irritation, anger, and fear.'

It's important to note then, that medically speaking, anorexia and anorexia nervosa are not interchangeable. The term anorexia by itself, is actually defined as the 'lack or loss of appetite.' So although it's not used as this a frequently anymore, it makes sense for it to appear in reference to veterinary sciences as well.

Focusing on the results that pertain to humans, one aspect I found intriguing was the number of times anorexia was mentioned in reference to melancholia, which I've highlighted below:

Concordance Results 3:

Hit	KWIC
6	, cramped and laboured gait . Anorexia and loss of condition
7	complains of headache, thirst, anorexia, and pain in the
8	lack of muscle coordination, anorexia and sleepiness . The drop
9	, acid in reaction ; complete anorexia, and some incoherence present .
10	sequence were, paroxysmal fever, anorexia ; at a later date ,
11	were slight dullness and anorexia . Blood exa- mination at
12	weak and prostrate . Complete anorexia . Bubo smaller and less
13	- ness, occasional nervousness and anorexia, colds and digestive disturbances
14	; very thirsty and prostrate . Anorexia complete . Unconscious and with
15	increased . Death ensued following anorexia, constipation, dyspnoea and abdominal
16	symptoms reported, such as anorexia, drowsiness, purplish comb, malaise
17	due to mania (3) and anorexia due to melancholia (3) . 4 . In
18	and general debility (1), and anorexia due to acute mania
19 2 4 2 Exhaustion after mania 4 5 2 Anorexia due to melancholia 0 2 2 Homicide ... 1 1
20	aria 4 4 14 Diarrhoea 17 6 16 Anorexia due to melancholia 4 4 5 Exhaustion
21	Dysentery Malaria Diarrhoea Anorexia due to melancholia Exhaustion
22	2, tuberculosis of lungs 11, and anorexia due to melancholia, Bright '
23	erculosis Dysentery Malaria Diarrhoea ... Anorexia due to Melancholia ... Exhaustion
24	101) relapsing oases . Influenza 47 ... Anorexia due to Melancholia 18 6 5 Exhaustion
25	2 3 4 6 Tuberculosis Dysentery Malaria Influenza Anorexia due to Melancholia Exhaustion
26	called 'Lecksucht', characterized by anorexia, emaciation, anaemia and diarrhoea ,
27	uberculosis 4, emphysema lungs 1, pneumonia 2, anorexia 1, epilepsy 1, pernicious anaemia 4, heart
28	, anaemia, photophobia, transitory glucosuria, anorexia, etc. Histological symptoms characteristic
29	, or lungs, followed by anorexia for a few days ,
30	of the eruption; and anorexia, frontal headache, and suffused
31	are characterised by dullness, anorexia, hyper-sensitivity and convulsions .
32	symp- toms, like cachexia, anorexia, inanition, ankylosis, bone exostosis

Screenshot of AntConc search results for: anorexia

'Melancholia' is defined by the American Heritage Medical Dictionary as '[e]xtreme, persistent sadness or hopelessness; depression.' Nowadays, the term is '[n]o longer in clinical use,' and is now referred to as clinical depression, or major depressive disorder (MMD).

However, as I only received 23 hits for *anorexia*, I'm not able to draw any conclusions here, so I decided to perform another search for the definition of anorexia, which as stated before is the 'lack or loss of appetite':

Concordance Results 5:

Hit	KWIC
1	organs and causes a lack of appetite . Many smokers
2	in the throat with loss of appetite , diarrha and
3	of great weakness and loss of appetite . They have
4	, enlargement of the liver , loss of appetite , emaciation , dema
5	the digestion nor causes loss of appetite . The bhang-
6	deal of uneasiness and loss of appetite ; only , however ,
7	injure digestion or cause loss of appetite . On the
8	are noxious . They produce loss of appetite and intoxication
9	the digestion or cause loss of appetite . It does
10	. Charas does not cause loss of appetite or hinder
11	, especially from ganja ; indigestion , loss of appetite , bronchitis , frequent
12	less recuperative power . Causes loss of appetite . Predisposes to
13	injured by bhang , and loss of appetite is caused
14	effect . No . Charas produces loss of appetite ; ganja and
15	causes atonic dyspepsia and loss of appetite . Have had
16	the digestion or caused loss of appetite . He is
17	some cases . It causes loss of appetite if the
18	the early stages , yet loss of appetite and indigestion
19	, and in not causing loss of appetite , dry tongue ,
20	it impairs . It produces loss of appetite , brings on
21	it induces dysentery and loss of appetite . Bhang in
22	cause indigestion , but causes loss of appetite . Does not
23	injures digestion or causes loss of appetite . In some
24	injures digestion and causes loss of appetite in the
25	, , dimness of sight , insanity , loss of appetite . In Bháo
26	first and afterwards causes loss of appetite . (d) I
27	the constitution and produce loss of appetite . They generally

Screenshot of AntConc search results for: lack of appetite and loss of appetite

As the screenshot shows, I received a lot more hits in reference to loss of, or lack of appetite – 207 in total. I noticed after briefly examining these results, that a large number were in reference to cannabis use, which if you're interested in the connotations surrounding cannabis in the medical papers, you can find more about that [here](#). However, what I did find in terms of mental health asylums, was that the official reports recognised a correlation between loss of appetite i.e., anorexia, and melancholia, i.e., MDD.

It is odd , seeing what a powerful factor in the production of insanity heredity is in Europe , that no case was admitted in which any history of here- dity could be traced .
Statement VIII is the return of the sick from other diseases than insanity treated in the Asylum Hospital .
From this it will be seen that the general health of the lunatics was good during the year , the admissions being much fewer than last year (6) Loss of appetite , distaste for , and finally refusal of food is a frequently occurring chain of events in cases of melancholia .
In such cases nourishment has to be supplied by means of the stomach pump or nutrient enemata are used .
To combat sleeplessness it is desirable , in the first place at any rate , to use hygienic measures in preference to the use of soporifics , which too frequently interfere with digestion .

File view of AntConc search result 207 for: loss of appetite – found [here](#)

III. Summary

Text analysis tools such as AntConc, can aid scholars in every

subject area in bringing forth new understandings to historical data. And looking back at what I found in the data, we can identify a trend that conforms to recent studies investigating correlations between eating disorders and other mental health conditions.

What I've discovered through researching this, is that although during the 19th to early 20th century, i.e., the period the collection encapsulates, anorexia nervosa was recognised as an eating disorder – [notably](#) British physician Sir William Gull coined the term 'anorexia nervosa' in 1873, but it was not as widely understood as it is today. The concept of eating disorders was even less understood in countries such as India, as historically, the country has had more struggles with food shortages and famine.

Furthermore, recent studies have identified a link between anorexia nervosa and other mental health conditions, namely depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). A [paper](#) published in 2021 noted a pattern in individuals suffering from another psychiatric condition at the same time as anorexia nervosa, in particular noting that MDD was prevalent 'in up to 64% of cases.'

Interestingly, a recent [review](#) has identified the prevalence of culture on representations of eating disorders. In Western conceptualisations, anorexia nervosa is primarily associated with dissatisfaction concerning body image, shape, or weight. However, in India, it's been identified that representations of eating disorders show a 'relative lack of concern for body fat/shape,' – though it's worth noting that there has been a recent shift, namely a growing association between perception of body shape in relation to eating disorders in India. Studies speculate that this trend could be due to 'the ongoing rapid societal transitions in India and the increasing influence of western ideals.'

Photo by [Ivan Bandura](#) on [Unsplash](#)