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Radionics and "Electrical Reactions of Abrams"



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AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE Sierra Sacramento Valley Museum of Medical History on Elvas Avenue is an elegant piece of furniture that at first glance might be mistaken for an early 20th century radio.

The function of dials and switches on this impressive device defies the imagination. The Calbro-Magnowave Radionics instrument has 26 bakelite dials with circular scales calibrated from 0-10 and housed in a mahogany upright cabinet. The front panel also contains a switch for diagnosis or treatment and various colored lights ("screening rays") that shine through a hole on the right side (the "emanator").

What most visitors to the museum don't suspect at first glance is the fascinating history surrounding this alleged medical device. This was the ultimate quackery device of the 1920s in its conceptualization, employment and cost. This radionics device was widely employed in the U.S. and Great Britain by many of Dr. Albert Abrams practitioners during the early 20th century. For an appreciation of this device's popularity, one needs to examine the evolution of "radionics" theory espoused by Dr. Abrams.

Spondylotherapy

Dr. Albert Abrams (1869-1924) of San Francisco was trained in neurology at Heidelberg University under professor de Saver. While under the professor's tutorship, Dr. Abrams was introduced to "radionics" as a form of medical dowsing or "radiesthesia", meaning "sensitive radiance." Early radionics was essentially a technique employing percussion (tapping the abdomen with the hand and listening to the sound reflected back).

This might be conceptualized as a very early method of imaging. Abrams differentiated disease tissue by the "dullness" of the tone reflected from percussing. He formulated a theory of disease states that could be differentiated based on not only their dullness tone but also on the abdominal location. Abrams mapped out the locations of numerous diseases on the abdomen into a topographical map he referred to as "spondylotherapy."

During its earlier developmental stage, Abrams confined spondylotherapy as a treatment modality confined to the spine for restoring blood circulation to disease regions of the body. Vacuum cups were applied by some practitioners to various regions of the back to improve circulation to diseased regions of the body. Spondylotherapy was occasionally supplemented with the use of Epson salts as a cathartic to purge the intestinal tract.

Radionics

Dr. Abrams had been previously exposed to Professor de Saver's theories on radionics. Living tissue was believed to emit radiation that could be detected. This was an energetic emission and not the ionizing type of radiation we associate with medical imaging devices. In the 18th century, Franz Anton Mesmer ("animal magnetism") and Luigi Galvani ("Galvanism") had both advocated electricity in animals.

Dr. Abrams was inspired to refine the theory of radionics with the arrival of radio in the late 19th century. He incorporated some of the theoretical concepts from physics and electrical engineering to disease processes. In 1916, Abrams published "New Concepts in Diagnosis and Treatment," which launched his conceptual legacy, "Electrical Reactions of Abrams" (ERA). ERA became the new foundation and framework for his radionics approach to the diagnosis and treatment of all diseases utilizing electrical devices he marketed.

The basic tenet underlying Abrams' ERA theory was that all diseases emit radiation at different vibratory rates that can be detected, measured and identified. An incredible facet of the ERA technique was the practitioner's ability to perform a diagnosis without any subject being physically present!

To appreciate this formulation of Abrams medicine, we need to examine his devices more closely. All of Dr. Abrams' devices were essentially wooden boxes containing no more than a series of resistors called "reflexophones" that were connected in no logical engineering order. One box with a metal electrode plate, referred to as a "dynamizer," was to function as a sample holder for blood, hair and handwriting!

A subject, upon seeing an advertisement, would mail a bloodstained cloth along with a sum of money to an ERA practitioner for a diagnosis of their malady. The sample would then be placed on the dynamizer's electrode plate, which was in turn wired to a healthy third party called a "reagent." The reagent would sometimes stand on a rubber mat or on electrodes in a basin of water facing west with another electrode on his forehead.

The practitioners would then percuss the reagent's abdomen for areas of dullness. Utilizing the numerous rheostats (variable resistors with a circular scale) located on the main device, a specific diagnosis could be attained by comparing the settings of rheostats with the reagent's abdominal locations and a numerical chart of diseases. Specific disease states were not only dependent on abdominal locations but also related to resistance scales in "ohms." These results were mailed back to the subject requesting them to come in for a series of treatments.

Abrams employed another wooden box for treatment he called a "oscillocast" device that was wired to the console of the main radionics unit. The subject would lie on a couch; two metal plate electrodes were positioned around the affected region of the body while vibratory waves of electrical energy were passed through the infected tissue. Return visits were sometime necessary to eradicate the infection.

Some ERA practitioners charged as much as \$200 a visit in the 1920s for these treatments! ERA devices could be leased for an initial \$200 plus a \$5 per month fee. The lessee had to sign an agreement that the device would never be opened. Abrams also held training courses at his San Francisco clinic for an additional \$200.

By 1921 ERA technology was alleged to be employed by 3,500 practitioners; with numerous complaints against them, fraudulent claims soon begin to ensue. Between 1923 and 1924 *Scientific American* investigated ERA devices and concluded they had no scientific merit. *JAMA* published a series of articles in 1922 on reform of medical quackery that were targeted towards the ERA. There were assertions that physicians who employ ERA devices should be expelled from membership in medical associations.

JAMA went so far as to mail in blood samples from two male guinea pigs to ERA practitioners that were subsequently diagnosed with a streptococcus infection of the left fallopian tube! A number of articles also appeared in the AMA journal exposing Dr. Abrams as a fraud who they never considered a serious threat to the medical profession.

Epilogue

Dr. Abrams died in January of 1924 and left his estate, worth millions of dollars, to the Electronic Medical Foundation (EMF). EMF continued to market updated ERA devices as well as a diagnosis-by-mail service for chiropractors.

Many of Dr. Abrams' updated devices, such as the Calbro-Magnowave in our museum, were employed by chiropractors up until the 1960s. Stanley Rogers initially developed the Calbro-Magnowave device as a dousing device for locating mineral deposits. Two engineers, Caldwell and Brownson, subsequently modified it as a medical device in the early 1920s. This was the only medical radionics device that incorporated a "cleaning" circuit so that the energy from previous clients could be purged from the instrument's circuits to prevent mistakenly measuring the combined vibratory rates of multiple individuals.

Dr. Ruth Drown, who had studied under Dr. Abrams and later became a chiropractor, carried on some of the ERA practices in a modified fashion. After Dr. Abrams' death, she developed a radionics device known as the "Homo Vibro Ray," which also consisted of an array of rheostats to tune into the body's vibratory rates. She operated a number of financially successful clinics in the U.S. that combined radionics, chiropractic and natural medicines. The AMA also discounted her claims; she was subsequently charged with fraud and died awaiting trial.

Katherine Gray's White Light Radionic Association in the United Kingdom and Switzerland has subsequently carried on radionics in a greatly modified, non-medical manner. Vibratory rates are believed to provide insight in psycho-spiritual development.

[Click here to view the original concepts of the late Dr. Albert Abrams, MD.](#)

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Major Sources:

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