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Citation

Khoshbin, Shahram, and Joel T. Katz. 2015. "Van Gogh's Physician." *Open Forum Infectious Diseases* 2 (3): ofv088. doi:10.1093/ofid/ofv088. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ofid/ofv088>.

Published Version

doi:10.1093/ofid/ofv088

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Van Gogh's Physician

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On December 24, 1888, a patient was admitted to the Hotel Dieu Hospital in Arles, France, brought in by the police because of reports that he had cut off his ear and given it to a woman. The patient was the Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh. The doctor on call was Dr. Felix Rey, a young "interne en medicine," age 21 (Figure 1). Van Gogh had mutilated the lower part of his ear. Dr. Rey had earlier seen a patient with epilepsy who had also injured his ear. After cleaning and bandaging Van Gogh's wound, Van Gogh was kept in the hospital for a week, during which he had multiple attacks and "crise." The young intern was quite familiar with these types of spells, because his roommate in medical school, a Dr. Aussoleil, had written his thesis on partial epilepsy. Doctor Rey told Van Gogh that he had made a diagnosis of epilepsy in him, which was the first time that anyone had explained Van Gogh's multiple, atypical symptoms [1]. Doctor Rey also showed Van Gogh a great deal

of compassion, and in multiple letters to Van Gogh's brother, Theo, Van Gogh described Dr. Rey's caring: "He is brave, hardworking, and always helping people." Van Gogh asked Theo to send him a copy of Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson" to give to Dr. Rey as a gift. Van Gogh was so taken with Dr. Rey that after discharge from the hospital, one of his first paintings was a portrait of Dr. Rey. Van Gogh continued to receive treatment from Dr. Rey for his ear. He continued to work despite the harsh treatment he received from the people of Arles and his recurrent spells that resulted in another hospitalization.

Finally, at the suggestion of a local pastor and the recommendation of Dr. Rey, he applied for treatment in the nearby asylum of Saint-Remy-de-Provence. There, Van Gogh came under the care of Dr. Theophile Peyron. Doctor Peyron entered the diagnosis of epilepsy in the medical records of the asylum and commented that Van Gogh's aberrant behavior was also due to his seizures. Doctor Peyron was a naval doctor, and he was militaristically strict. However, he eventually gave Van Gogh permission to paint outdoors. During this period, Van Gogh created some of his most celebrated paintings, although



Figure 1. Russia, Moscow, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, All, Portrait of doctor Felix Rey wearing a blue jacket, (Photo by Sergio Anelli/Electa/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images).

Received 2 June 2015; accepted 5 June 2015.

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Open Forum Infectious Diseases

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DOI: 10.1093/ofid/ofv088



Figure 2. Vincent van Gogh (Groot-Zundert 1853–1890 Auvers-sur-Oise). *The Courtyard of the Hospital at Arles* 1889, Oil on canvas 73 × 92 cm Collection Oskar Reinhart «Am Römerholz», Winterthur.

he had at least 4 major spells. The details of the therapy given to Van Gogh is not well known; he probably was receiving hydrotherapy during this period. However, it was in Arles that Van Gogh reached the pinnacle of his creativity and technique, particularly in his use of complementary colors, represented in multiple self-portraits, portraits of his friends, and the colorful citizens of Arles. He presented to Dr. Rey a portrait (Cover) along with 2 other now-famous paintings—“A

Courtyard of the Hospital” (Figure 2) and “The Dormitory of the Hospital” (Figure 3). Although Dr. Rey showed great interest in Van Gogh’s work, he did not quite appreciate the style of the portrait, and he gave it to his mother. His mother declared, “It is hideous!” She used it to close a hole in the family chicken coop. In 1901, the painting was discovered by an art dealer, to whom Dr. Rey sold it along with the other 2 paintings. The portrait ended up in the



Figure 3. Vincent van Gogh (Groot-Zundert 1853–1890 Auvers-sur-Oise). *The Ward in the Hospital at Arles* 1889, Oil on canvas 72 × 91 cm. Collection Oskar Reinhart «Am Römerholz», Winterthur.

collection of a famous artist, Amboise Vollard, and eventually ended up at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. Although Dr. Rey had not considered Van Gogh’s portrait of him a realistic depiction, years later a colleague, Dr. Picard of Arles, saw the painting in Russia and declared that it was the most realistic image of Dr. Rey that he had seen.

Doctor Rey (1867–1932) later went on to become a specialist in tuberculosis. He won a medal for his work in a cholera epidemic. Yet, Dr. Rey’s name will forever be associated with Van Gogh, for whom he cared in the early days of his medical career, and for the very interesting diagnosis that he made in giving a medical etiology for Van Gogh’s mental symptoms and personality disorder. Doctor Rey also was particularly compassionate to Van Gogh during his very troubled stay in Arles. In that period of 15 months in Arles, Van Gogh produced 200 paintings, 200 drawings and water colors, and 200 illustrated letters—extreme productivity that is consistent with the hypergraphia associated with partial (temporal lobe) seizure disorders [2]. His drawings and paintings of the hospital grounds and the wards both in Arles and Saint-Remy are exquisite renderings of the states of hospitals and asylums of the period.

Journal Cover

Painting of Felix Rey, canvas, 64 × 53 cm; 1889. Moscow, Pushkin Museum; see <http://ofid.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/3.cover-expansion>.

Acknowledgments

Potential conflicts of interest. All authors: No reported conflicts.

All authors have submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest.

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