

The Doman-Delacato Treatment of Neurologically Handicapped Children

Statement Approved (as of March 15, 1968) by:

*American Academy for Cerebral Palsy
American Academy of Neurology
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Academy for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine
American Academy of Orthopedics
Canadian Association for Children with Learning Disabilities
Canadian Association for Retarded Children
Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled
National Association for Retarded Children (U.S.A.)*

DURING the past decade the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential and their affiliates have made increasing claims for the efficacy of their methods of treatment for brain damage and other disorders^{1, 2}. A few organizations have issued cautionary statements.³⁻⁸ Information has recently become available which makes it important to review the current status of the controversy and propose some recommendations.

The reasons for concern include the following:

1. Promotional methods^{9, 10} appear to put parents in a position where they cannot refuse such treatment without calling into question their adequacy and motivation as parents.

2. The regimens prescribed are so demanding and inflexible⁹⁻¹¹ that they may lead to neglect of other family members' needs.¹²

3. It is asserted that if therapy is not carried out as rigidly prescribed, the child's potential will be damaged, and that anything less than 100 per cent effort is useless.^{9, 10}

4. Restrictions are often placed upon age-appropriate activities of which the child is capable, such as walking or listening to music,^{13, 14} though unwarranted by any supportive data and knowledge of long-term results published to date.

5. Claims are made for rapid and conclusive diagnosis¹⁵ according to a

'Developmental Profile'¹⁶ of no known validity. No data on which construction of the Profile had been based have ever been published, nor do we know of any attempt to cross-validate it against any accepted methods.

6. Undocumented claims are made for cures in a substantial number of cases^{1, 2} extending even beyond disease states to making normal children superior^{2, 9, 17, 18} easing world tensions², and possibly 'hastening the evolutionary process.'^{2, 19}

7. Without supporting data, Doman and Delacato have indicted many typical typical child-rearing practices as limiting a child's potential, increasing thereby the anxiety of already burdened and confused parents.^{12, 20}

The controversy over these claims and assertions has recently been reviewed in some detail.¹²

The Theory

The theory is alleged to be of universal applicability,^{2, 18} but is largely based upon questionable and oversimplified concepts of hemispheric dominance and the relation of individual sequential development to phylogenesis²¹. Further, it asserts that the great majority of cases of mental retardation, learning problems, and behavior disorders are caused by brain damage or 'poor neurological organization'¹⁵ and that all these problems lie somewhere on a single continuum of brain damage, for which the treatment advocated by the Institutes is the only effective answer.^{2, 9}

Presently available information does not support these contentions. In particular, the lack of uniform dominance or sidedness is probably not a significant factor in either the etiology or therapy of these conditions.²¹⁻²⁷

Cultural and anthropological differences have also been 'explained' by the theory. For example, the lack of a written language

in some primitive tribes is attributed to restrictions upon crawling and creeping,²⁸ an exceedingly narrow and questionable view.

A careful review of the theory²¹ has led to the conclusion that 'the tenets are either unsupported or overwhelmingly contradicted when tested by theoretical, experimental, or logical evidence from the relevant scientific literature. As a scientific hypothesis the theory of neurological organisation seems to be without merit.'

Current Status of Claimed Therapeutic Results

Results published by the Institutes or their supporters are inconclusive.^{15, 29, 30} Many reports of improvement in reading ability have been heralded as support for the theory,^{19, 31, 32} but statistical analysis has shown no demonstrable benefits.^{21, 33}

It has been pointed out repeatedly that some young handicapped children have been misdiagnosed or given an unduly pessimistic prognosis. The course of maturation in these children is quite varied and may result in an unwarranted claim that improvement was due to the specific form of treatment.^{12, 34, 35} Some of the cases dramatically publicized by the Institutes have been children with traumatic brain damage, who often make substantial gains without any special treatment.

Some controlled studies of the Doman-Delacato claims with respect to reading have been carried out and have shown no benefit.^{36, 39}

Previous cautionary statements have emphasized the need for well-controlled studies. The theoretical and practical problems involved in carrying out a study of the Institutes' claims present many difficulties.⁴⁰ A well-designed, comprehensive study (supported by both federal and private agencies) was in the final planning stage when the Institutes with-

drew their original agreement to the design.⁴¹ With the failure of this attempt, the burden of proof for claimed results lies with the Institutes.

At present there are no data available which contradict the likelihood that any

improvement observed with this method of treatment can be accounted for on the basis of growth and development, the intensive practice of certain isolated skills, or the non-specific effects of intensive stimulation.

SUMMARY

The Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential appear to differ substantially from other groups treating developmental problems in (a) the excessive nature of their undocumented claims for cure and (b) the extreme demands placed upon parents in carrying out an unproven technique without fail.

Advice to parents and professional workers cannot await conclusive results of controlled studies of all aspects of the method. Physicians and therapists should acquaint themselves with the issue in the controversy and the available evidence. We have done this and concur with the conclusion of Robbins and Glass:²¹

'There is no empirical evidence to substantiate the value of either the theory or practice of neurological organization . . . If the theory is to be taken seriously . . . its advocates are under an obligation to provide reasonable support for the tenets of the theory and a series of experimental investigations, consistent with scientific standards, which test the efficacy of the rationale.'

To date, we know of no attempt to fulfil this obligation.

REFERENCES

1. Bird, J. (1967) 'When children can't learn.' *Saturday Evening Post*, 240 (15, 27-31, 72-74, July 29.
2. Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential: (1967) *Human Potential* 1(1).
3. American Academy of Pediatrics (1965) Executive Board Statement. *Amer. Acad. Pediat. Newsletter* 16 (11) 1-6.
4. American Academy for Cerebral Palsy (1965) Statement of Executive Committee, Feb. 15.
5. United Cerebral Palsy Association of Texas. The Doman-Delacato Treatment of Neurologically Handicapped Children (*Information Bulletin*, undated)
6. Canadian Association for Retarded Children (1965) Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential. *Ment. Retardation (Canada)*, Fall, 27-28.
7. American Academy of Neurology (1967) Joint Executive Board Statement: The Doman-Delacato Treatment of Neurologically Handicapped Children. *Neurology* (Minneapolis), 637.
8. American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (1967) Statement on Doman-Delacato Treatment of Neurologically Handicapped Children.
9. Beck, J. (1964) Unlocking the Secrets of the Brain, Chicago: Chicago Tribune Magazine (reprinted from articles dated Sept. 13 and 27, 1964).
10. Linton, T. S. A Parent's Guide to Patterning and Floor Activity. Media, Pa.: The Neurosurgical Institute and the Neurosurgical Clinic for Children, undated (processed).
11. Maisel, A. Q. (1964) 'Hope for brain-injured children.' *Reader's Digest*, October, 135-140.
12. Freeman, R. D. (1967) 'Controversy over 'patterning' as a treatment for brain damage in children.' *J. Amer. med. Ass.*, 202, (5), 385-388.
13. Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential (1963, 1964) Instruction sheets: The Romper, 1963; The Harness, 1964.
14. LeWinn, E. B., Doman, G., Doman, R. J., Delacato, C. H., Spitz, E. B., Thomas, E. W. (1966) 'Neurological organization: the basis for learning.' In J. Hellmuth (ed.) *Learning Disorders*, vol. 2. Seattle: Special Child Publications, 48-93.
15. Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential (1964) A Summary of Concepts, Procedures and Organization.
16. Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential (1963) The Doman-Delacato Profile and the Doman-Moran Graphic Summary (revised 1965).
17. Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential (1967) Bulletin, 12 (1), 57, 58.
18. Institutes for the Achievements of Human Potential. Statement of Objectives, undated.
19. Delacato, C. H. (1959) The Treatment and Prevention of Reading Problems: The Neuro-Psychological Approach. Springfield, Ill. Charles C. Thomas.

20. Doman, G., Delacato, C. H. (1965) 'Train your baby to be a genius.' *McCall's*, March, 65, 169, (1965) 170, 172.
21. Robbins, M. P., Glass, G. V. (1968) 'The Doman-Delacato rationale: a critical analysis.' In J. Hellmuth (ed.) *Educational Therapy*, vol. 2, Seattle: Special Child Publications.
22. (1962) Money, J. 'Dyslexia: a postconference review.' In J. Money (ed.) *Reading Disability: Progress and Research Needs in Dyslexia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 9-33.
23. Money, J. (1967) 'Reading disorders in children.' In Brennehan-Kelley practice of Pediatrics. Hagerstown Md.: Hoeber, vol. 4, chap. 14A, 1-14.
24. Belmont, L., Birch, H. G. (1965) 'Lateral dominance, lateral awareness, and reading disability.' *Child Develop.*, 36, 57-71.
25. Spitzer, R. L., Rabkin, R., Kramer, Y. (1959) 'The relationship between "mixed dominance" and reading disabilities.' *J. Pediat.*, 54, 76-80.
26. Stephens, W. E., Cunningham, E. S., Stigler, B. J. (1967) 'Reading readiness and eye-hand preference patterns in first-grade children.' *Exceptional Child*, 33 (7), 481-488.
27. Bettman, J. W., Jr., Stern, E. L., Whitsell, L. J., Gofman, H. F. (1967) 'Cerebral dominance in developmental dyslexia.' *Arch. Ophthalmol.* 78 (12), 722-729.
28. Green, L. J. (1967) 'Functional neurological performance in primitive cultures.' *Human Potential*, 1 (1), 19-26.
29. Doman, R. J., Spitz, E. B., Zucman, E., Delacato, C. H., Doman, G. (1966) 'Children with severe brain injuries: neurological organization in terms of mobility.' *J. Amer. med. Ass.*, 174, 257-262.
30. Freeman, R. D. (1967) Review of J. R. Kershner: An Investigation of the Doman-Delacato Theory of Neuropsychology as it Applies to Trainable Mentally Retarded Children in Public Schools. *J. Pediat.* 71 (6), 914-915.
31. Delacato, C. H. (1963) *The Diagnosis and Treatment of Speech and Reading Problems*. Springfield, Ill. Charles C. Thomas.
32. Delacato, C. H. (1966) *Neurological Organization and Reading*. Springfield, Ill. Charles C. Thomas.
33. Glass, G. V. (1966) *A Critique of Experiments on the Role of Neurological Organization in Reading Performance*. Urbana, Ill. University of Illinois College of Education, October.
34. Koch, R., Graliker, B., Bronston, W., Fishler, K. (1965) 'Mental retardation in early childhood.' *Amer. J. Dis. Child.*, 109, 243-251.
35. Masland, R. L. (1966) 'Unproven methods of treatment.' *Pediatrics*, 37, 713-714.
36. Robbins, M. P. (1965) *The Delacato Interpretation of Neurological Organization: An Empirical Study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago.
37. Robbins, M. P. (1966) 'A study of the validity of Delacato's theory of neurological organization.' *Exceptional Child.*, 32 (8), 517-523.
38. Robbins, M. P. (1966) 'Creeping, laterality and reading.' *Academic Therapy Quart.*, 1 (4), 200-206.
39. Robbins, M. P. (1967) 'Test of the Doman-Delacato rationale with retarded readers.' *J. Amer. med. Ass.*, 202 (5), 389-393.
40. Rosner, B. S. (1967) 'Outcomes of treatment of brain-damaged children: are controlled studies possible?' Unpublished manuscript.
41. Rosner, B. S. (1967) 'Final report on planning grant: treatment of brain-injured children (to Vocational Rehabilitation Administration, National Association for Retarded Children, Given Foundation).