

Case report

A 58-year-old woman was compulsorily admitted to hospital in 1967 after twice shooting (and missing) her family doctor with a hunting gun. Following the attempts, she proceeded to inflict minor injuries to his head with a stick. The doctor did not press charges against her. For a number of years she had been suffering from delusions of infestation – small animals swarmed under her scalp and crawled under her skin. She could also hear the insects and see them while combing her hair. She would present her doctor with “specimens” in a matchbox. She also believed that she had caught scabies from her cat, and that other villagers were also infested. She sought help from the police, and the town mayor, and harassed her family doctor for almost two years. In the event she developed the delusions that he had engineered a plot against her, and was responsible for her symptoms. Her husband, a roadworker, who was an alcoholic, shared this belief, and threatened the doctor after his wife was compulsorily admitted. His conviction gradually melted after her admission.

Born in Brittany, France, the patient was of humble origins and received a poor education (she could hardly read). Her alcoholic mother had died at the age of 68 years from ‘dementia’, and her father hanged himself in his 50s. Her husband had spent from 1940 to 1945 as a prisoner of war in Germany, and she had had difficulties in rearing two daughters. She had become progressively irritable, developed sleep problems, and shown abnormal behaviour. Before attacking her doctor, she had been sleepless for a week. She had told this to her doctor who apparently had refused to treat her.

On a follow-up carried out 24 years after her admission, the patient was found to be in the same provincial mental hospital suffering from cognitive impairment and tardive dyskinesia. Earlier attempts at discharging her had proved fruitless, as she tried to kill herself on various occasions.

She was treated throughout with neuroleptics (e.g. levomepromazine) which do not seem to have ameliorated her symptoms. Unfortunately, the case notes are not good enough to provide detailed information on any changes in her mental state.