Disabilities and Liabilities Brought on by Epimedium Pubescens: A (Mock) Review of the Current Literature

Marcia Curtis

Abstract
This review examines the current literature pertaining to the disabling effects of epimedium pubescens (EP) on young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. The symptoms of EP are widely agreed upon: Fowler’s aphasia dysgrammica (a failure to adhere to essential grammatical styles and structures of a given language, including its citation rules), synesthesia (a neurologically based condition in which stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to involuntary experiences in another sensory pathway), pseudobulbar affect (pathological emotional expression sometimes called “emotional incontinence”), and visual agnosia or more specifically prosopagnosia (the failure to recognize known objects including familiar faces). But disagreement persists regarding the causes of this condition. Some neurogrammarians and other practitioners insist that commonly identified symptoms and expressions of EP may in fact be its underlying cause. As researchers S.T. Runk and Ebon E. Wite point out, aphasia dysgrammica, along with paragrammatism in which the patient’s writing is incomprehensible to others but makes sense to the patient, is the primary and defining symptom in all known instances of EP and may therefore be causative, not simply characteristic, of the ailment. Moreover, Runk and Wite posit, Fowler’s aphasia dysgrammica is not truly a disease or disorder at all, but the result of a “willful refusal” to follow rules of syntax and citation (“Tangled” 42). Nonsense, respond their critics, who see this charge as blaming the EP victims (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments”; U. Haullum). After examining points of agreement and disagreement among experts, this review concludes that additional research involving quantitative analysis as well as individual case studies is needed in order to determine the cause, and perhaps prevention, of this debilitating and often embarrassing disorder.

Introducing EP
In 1994 the first bona fide case of epimedium pubescens was reported to the National Center for Disease Control in Atlanta (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments” 266; U. Haullum 12; “Who Reads”). According to health officials, the patient was an eighteen-year-old student at the University of Georgia who, witnesses said, had created a disturbance in his first-year chemistry class by talking loudly to his watch and gesturing wildly at the clock (U. Haullum 13). In his lengthy study From Fowler’s Aphasia Dysgrammica to Visual Agnosia: The Dispiriting Journey of Epimedium Pubescens, researcher Uriah Haullum describes the circumstances surrounding the initial diagnosis:

1 This paper is meant to show you the style and structure of a literature review, that is, what a literature review is and does. Therefore, the style and formatting are accurate. The content, including sources, however, is fake, completely and utterly fake. I made it all up. Nothing is true. Nada! Zilch! Bupkis! So if you think you have epimedium pubescens, trust me, you don’t.
The patient, who clearly mistook the faces of timepieces for the faces of friends, was first assumed to be drugged or suffering narcotics withdrawal, but blood tests showed no substances beyond the usual. Since the patient himself was utterly incoherent in his speech patterns and emotionally inconsolable, friends were interviewed and school records were inspected. It became clear the patient had, over a period of weeks, shown all the signs of the yet-unnamed *epimedium pubescens: aphasia dysgrammica, synesthesia, and now prosopagnosia*. (15)

The second case, according to Chalcedon and Volklore, could only be considered an “outbreak” ("Impairments" 268) that baffled health officials and drew media attention. As Chalcedon and Volklore describe it, in November 1995, three sorority sisters from a New England university became unruly when they were denied admission to a local brewery. Two of the young women had attempted to enter the premises arm-in-arm with light-weight beach chairs; the third young woman held tight, and babbled licentiously, to a hat rack draped in a leather baseball cap. A young E.M.T. called to the scene recognized the women’s condition as strikingly similar to the case of the Georgia student, which he had come across while completing a literature review for his College Writing class:

At the emergency technician’s urging, the women’s school records were examined and it was discovered that while they had been enrolled in different first-year writing courses, each had demonstrated a marked reluctance to grasp basic grammatical rules, especially the rules of MLA citation. Over time, weakened syntax had dissolved into the incoherent speech and writing patterns characteristic of what we now call “Fowler’s *aphasia dysgrammica*” and ultimately into the general perceptual incoherence of full blown *prosopagnosia*. (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments” 269)

I. Haullum disputes the Red Sox cap, claiming it was, in fact, a Yankees cap, and U. Haullum downplays the role of *aphasia dysgrammica* in the women’s condition (22-3). But all who refer to this case agree it was the first known instance of group (or sororal) *prosopagnosia* and the second known instance of the still unnamed EP (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments”; I. Haullum; U. Haullum; Runk and Wite, *The Writer*; “Who Reads”).

In both of these early cases, the key to the diagnosis was the pattern of symptoms, not the individual symptoms themselves: first a failure or refusal to grasp sentence patterns followed by a confusion of sense patterns and culminating in an inability to distinguish objects from other objects or, as the case advanced, objects from the subject himself (“Who Reads”). Between 1994 and 1998, over five hundred similar cases were reported, most of them on college campuses (Labile et al.) and all of them among socially active, otherwise healthy young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, thus earning this particular *epimedium* disorder the classification *pubescens* (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Putting” 116; U. Haullum 32; “Who Reads”). Since 1994, instances of *epimedium pubescens* have increased two-thousand fold (I. Haullum) and, as experts, health officials and sufferers agree, *epimedium pubescens* has become a major threat to American family and social life (I. Haullum; U. Haullum; Labile et al.; Odder; “Who Reads”). The challenge now is to understand symptoms, pinpoint causes, and find a remedy.
Understanding EP Symptoms

A View from the EP Experts’ Perch

Neurogrammarians S.T. Runk and Ebon E. Wite are widely credited with being the first to recognize the particular cluster of Acute Epimedium Disorder symptoms now known as *epimedium pubescens* (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments”; Chalcedon and Volklore, “Putting”; U. Haullum; “Who Reads”). In their seminal collection of vignettes and studies, *The Writer Who Wrote for Himself Alone*, Runk and Wite present twenty-four cases of epimedium disorders and the people who suffer them. Dividing their text into four sections -- "losses" of grammatical function; "excesses"; artistic "transports" involving altered perception and remembrance; and "the simple," or the world of dull memoranda and thank-you notes -- Runk and Wite reveal the inner lives of these "suffering, afflicted, fighting human subject[s]" (iv). Each chapter focuses on a specific form of Acute Epimedium Disorder, from *epimedium acuminatum* (marked by incoherent syntax and senses [26]) to *epimedium sempervirens* (which is “just what its name suggests” [182]). Most germane to the current study is the book’s title chapter, which discusses the strange case of Young Master P., “a student of distinction” (10) whose increasingly debilitating Fowler’s *aphasia dysgrammica* and bouts of *paragrammatism* ultimately leave him unable to distinguish sentences from sentence fragments or his dorm room from his desk. “Slowly but steadily, Young Master P. follows an *epimedium pubescens* sufferer’s sad descent from flights of solipsistic expression through wild pendulum swings of emotion into the pits of a grotesque world where faces of friends blend with the face of a clock or serve as seats for strange women” (14). It is a world Young Master P., an artist of some skill, depicted for Runk and Wite in Dali-like fashion (see Figure 1).

Uriah M. Haullum’s exhaustive and exhausting study *From Fowler’s Aphasia Dysgrammica to Visual Agnosia: The Dispiriting Journey of Epimedium Pubescens* presents more than a thousand pages of description of the symptoms of *epimedium pubescens*. Unlike Runk and Wite’s modest volume, this book is clearly intended for a scientific audience, well versed in the terminology and concepts of neuroscience in general and neurolinguistics in particular. Haullum travels much the same terrain as Runk and Wite, but lingers longer in the fearsome second circle of the EP sufferer’s hell -- *synesthesia* and its often-accompanying *pseudobulbar affect* or “emotional incontinence.” “It depends,” writes Haullum, “on the degree to which an EP patient has suffered early stage *aphasia dysgrammica* whether or not s/he will show the full symptomatology of stage two, *synesthesia* including *pseudobulbar affect*” (324). Referencing the work of Chalcedon and Volklore, he agrees that acute *aphasia dysgrammica* always precedes the “emotional crazy quilt” (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments” 275) of *synesthesia*, but he stops well short, as we will see, of endorsing Runk and Wite’s notion that *aphasia dysgrammica* not only precedes but causes the later symptoms, including *synesthesia* and *prosopagnosia*.

A View from the EP Patients’ Seat

While the experts explore the symptoms of EP, patients live them. Eve Odder’s predicament is perhaps most poignant. In a video posted on YouTube, Eve is interviewed by older brother Evan Odder. She makes little or no sense, her talk a web of empty words, random phrases, and mindless political sound bites. Still, much is said as Eve balances, with difficulty, on the top of a twenty-seven
inch computer screen, which she has apparently mistaken for her bed, and looks directly into the Coke bottle she thinks is her brother’s camera lens. Crying one minute and laughing uncontrollably the next, she shows us the sad reality of living without style or structure, of life without syntax.

With “Tangled in Words,” Runk and Wite step out of their role as experts and recall their own struggles with *paragrammatism*. To demonstrate the title’s meaning, Wite wrongly writes, “At five years old, my mother taught me to whistle in the tulgey wood and I’ve been all mimsy since” (37). Fearing what lies ahead and looking back on what went amiss, Wite goes on to explain that, despite being a renown neurogrammian now, as a secondary school and college student he willfully refused to learn basic grammatical rules and structures (including citation formatting), thereby bringing on his current affliction. U. Haullum attacks this statement as a “toxic mix of atavism and personal eccentricity” (32), but fellow sufferers echo Wite’s words (“Who Reads”).

The Fowler’s Aphasia Dysgrammatica Society website (*FADs*) announces its core belief in personal responsibility in a banner headline containing the society’s motto, “Write a Sentence Right or See the World Wrong.” Like many other nonprofit organization websites, *FADs* offers a page of personal testimonials from famous members – Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, former President George W. Bush, Wasilla ex-Mayor Sarah Palin, etc. – all fascinating no doubt to the writers themselves but utterly incomprehensible to readers. The site presents a “Support Us” page as well, which solicits donations and sells novelty furniture – beds in the shape of pianos, chairs in the shape of roses, footstools with realistic human legs – under the heading, “Sit Like You See It.” But most important is “Who Reads Faces?” the site’s central article on the symptoms and stages of EP.

Obviously composed by a non-*FADsy*, the article shows real audience-awareness in its clarity and easy accessibility even to the unininitiated. Its opening list of symptoms aligns with the findings of most researchers and health professionals, including Chalcedon and Volldore, along with U. Haullum: 1) failure to distinguish sentence parts and patterns, e.g., subjects from objects, direct objects from indirect objects, etc.; 2) confusion of sensory patterns or synesthesia, e.g., hearing colors, tasting sounds, etc.; and 3) failure to distinguish objects from other objects or, in advanced cases, inanimate objects from human subjects. However, *FADs* aligns itself most closely with Runk and Wite when, in addressing its audience directly, the article emphasizes personal power and choice in its description of “Stage 1 EP”:

*Do you hate hearing about grammar and turn off at the mere mention? Do you pretend to proofread an essay while you’re really thinking about lunch? Would you rather let an automatic citation machine do your work for you than do it yourself? Answer a single “Yes” and watch out! The choice you make today may be the FAD you suffer tomorrow.*

The warning would make anyone want to know more, but unfortunately the accompanying works cited list, while extensive, was apparently composed (or I should say, “decomposed”) by a *FADs* member: Its entries are so erratic in their formatting as to be impossible to follow or trace.

**Pinpointing the Causes**

As we have seen, the literature surveyed in this review appears consistent in its understanding of the symptoms and stages of EP. Some experts, in fact, see the sequence of stages as definitive of EP as distinguished from other forms of AED (Chalcedon and Volklore, “Impairments”);
Chalcedon and Volklore, “Putting”; U. Haullum; Runk and Wite, The Writer; “Who Reads”). Disagreement erupts, however, when we attempt to pinpoint the cause.

Runk and Wite, along with members of FADs, insist the cause of EP can be located – and remedied – in stage 1, Fowler’s aphasia dysgrammica. They disagree on one point, however. FADs members hold fast to the notion of individual responsibility, urging dysgrammica or paragrammatism sufferers to “shake off the shackles of lassitude and diagram a sentence a day, for only you can prevent early onset synesthesia” (“Who Reads”). Runk and Wite, on the other hand, find it “unfair to blame Fowler’s all on its sufferers” (“Tangled” 42). The true underlying cause of dysgrammica, they maintain, is not lazy students but lazy teachers who fail to instill in their young charges the delights of perfect prose and the almost physical satisfaction of a perfectly formatted citation (43).

U. Haullum disagrees with both Runk and Wite and the members of FADs. In direct reference to Runk and Wite, he warns against confusing cause with chronology: “Power should not be deduced from priority a priori nor cause derived from effect a posteriori” (333). In somewhat more comprehensible fashion, he continues:

We may understand the impulse of those experiencing epimedium pubescens to find a certain power in blaming themselves for their condition and to look back on the early stages of Fowler’s aphasia dysgrammica and paragrammatism as a time of missed opportunity to right the course of personal history. But we cannot condone it, especially in neurogrammarians like Messieurs Wite and Runk, scientists who should speak not from the heart but from the head, however cluttered and unstructured that head may be. Studies have shown irrefutably that in other forms of Acute Epimedium Disorders “prosopagnosia precedes paragrammatism” (Chalcedon & Volklore, 2005, p.269) and the latter does not, indeed cannot, precipitate the former. (334)

Haullum’s reference to Chalcedon and Volklore is telling, and perhaps to be expected: all three are on the faculty of the Yale School of Medicine and, like Haullum, Chalcedon and Volklore have taken Runk and Wite to task for attributing cause to either students or teachers. In “Putting a New Face on It: A Study of Late-Stage Epimedium Pubescens,” they make this charge and emphasize it with an image:

Runk and Wite falsely attribute the fanciful metaphors of Young Master P.’s poetry to youthful enthusiasm rather than late-stage synesthesia and mistake psychic chaos for literary control. We have chopped up many students, and we know what we are talking about. Close examination of the brains of normal students and EP students show marked differences, the normal brain exhibiting an obvious capacity for grammar and sentence diagramming; the EP brain showing something definitely fishy (see Figure 2 right). (120)

Like the argument whether marijuana use leads to or simply precedes more dangerous substance abuse, the argument whether aphasia dysgrammica causes or simply comes before later stages of EP seems unresolvable. Unfortunately, until it is resolved remedy seems a far-off hope.
Finding a Remedy; Concluding This Endless Review

Just twenty short years ago, *epimedium pubescens* was a rare disorder known only to a few odd scientists. Today 2500 young people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five exhibit the telling symptoms of uncontrollable mood swings, incoherent speech patterns, and inappropriate punctuation. As *Time* columnist Ira Haullum informs readers, “EP has suddenly become a source of disruption in families, schools, and social clubs nationwide.” *New York Times* reporters Libby Labile et al. confirm Haullum’s warning in their article on the Supreme Court’s decision challenging the University of Massachusetts Amherst Student Code of Conduct as outdated and instructing school officials to “put in place safeguards that take into account ... how *epimedium pubescens* may affect adolescent behavior.” Yet as we have seen, while scientists are united in their recognition of EP and its symptoms, they remain divided in their perceptions of its cause. Until we know the cause or causes of EP, we can do little more than, as little Eve Odder says, “manage my symptoms.”

Clearly additional research is needed. Members of FADs and researchers like S.T. Runk and Ebon E. Wite offer firsthand insight into the problem. Yet their critics, scientists like Uriah Haullum, Katarzyna Chalcedon and Bythnia Volklore, are right to question the objectivity of those who suffer the disorder. Therefore, scientific inquiry should shift from the laboratory setting and push for more qualitative and quantitative studies of the thousands of cases now known in the U.S. Only when researchers have determined the degree to which willpower alone can or cannot determine a latent EP students’ success in mastering grammatically correct as well as creative writing will we know how to stop Fowler’s *aphasia dysgrammica* from progressing into full-blown *epimedium pubescens*.

Works Cited


