

Alzheimer first described the disease that Kraepelin would eventually name for him at a meeting of the South West German Psychiatrists in Tübingen in 1906. He presented a brief report of the case of a 51-year-old woman who developed progressive dementia, accompanied by focal signs (symptoms such as aphasia or apraxia which suggest damage to specific, localized areas of the brain), hallucinations, and delusions. On postmortem, her brain was found to be atrophied, and it contained numerous senile plaques and a newly observed pathological structure—densely twisted bundles of neurofibrils, or neurofibrillary tangles, which were made visible to microscopic observation through a newly developed silver-staining technique.<sup>24</sup> Most of the brief report is devoted to a description of her clinical symptoms and the pathological changes found in her brain at postmortem. But Alzheimer concluded the report by suggesting that “on the whole, it is evident that we are dealing with a peculiar, little-known disease process. . . . We must not be satisfied to force it into the existing group of well-known disease patterns.”<sup>25</sup>

While this seems to suggest that Alzheimer did indeed believe that this case belonged in a new category, one distinct from senile dementia, his opinion was not entirely clear from the brief report. In any case, it is hard to see what could have been regarded as new about the clinical or pathological description of the case. The clinical symptoms Alzheimer described were essentially the same as those found in senile dementia which had been described often in the literature, though Alzheimer suggested, as others did in the years that followed, that some feature of this case was the young age of the patient. Was this enough to declare a separate disease category, as Kraepelin claimed? In 1911, a year after Kraepelin’s textbook declared that it did, Alzheimer himself seemed to argue that it did not. In a lengthy paper that included a more thorough report of the first case as well as a second case and a discussion of a handful of similar cases of pre-senile dementia reported by others, he wrote that “as similar cases of disease obviously occur in the late old age, it is therefore not exclusively a presenile disease, and there are cases of senile dementia which do not differ from these presenile cases with respect to the severity of the disease process. There is then no tenable reason to consider these cases as caused by a specific disease process. *They are senile psychoses, atypical forms of senile dementia.* Nevertheless, they do assume a certain separate position, so that one has to know of their existence . . . in order to avoid misdiagnosis.”<sup>27</sup> As German Berrios concludes, it seems that all Alzheimer meant to emphasize in describing these cases in both the 1907 and 1911 publications was that senile dementia could occur in a younger person.<sup>28</sup>

So why, then, did Kraepelin assert the existence of the new entity, Alzheimer’s disease? A number of speculative theories have been proposed: that he did so as part of a struggle against the inroads being made by Freud and psychoanalysis, hoping to create in Alzheimer’s disease a second example (general paresis being the first) of a mental illness with a clearly defined pathological substrate;<sup>29</sup> that he did so in order to garner prestige for his department, which was in a rivalry with that of Arnold Pick in Prague;<sup>30</sup> that he did so in order to justify the creation of Alzheimer’s expensive pathology lab in Munich;<sup>31</sup> finally, that he did so with full intellectual honesty out of the assumption that differences in age of onset were a sufficient reason to make the distinction and that, in any case, he was reserving final judgment for more decisive evidence.<sup>32</sup> These explanations are not mutually exclusive, of course, but as Berrios correctly points out, they are all highly speculative. Until more systematic historical work is done on Kraepelin and his professional world, his decision remains inscrutable.<sup>33</sup>