

How did you become interested in catatonia?

Jonathan Rogers:

I became interested in catatonia because of a condition called autoimmune encephalitis. Some people will be familiar with the concept of autoimmune conditions where your body's immune system actually targets your own tissue. The same thing can happen in the brain.

In autoimmune encephalitis, there are antibodies that are directed against proteins on the neurons in your brain. This can cause seizures, it can cause movement disorders, but it can also present with psychiatric symptoms such as psychosis. And I became very interested in this relationship with psychosis until someone pointed out to me, "Hey Jonathan, is there a relationship with catatonia?"

Much closer actually, he was right. There's a very strong relationship between one form of autoimmune encephalitis and catatonia. And this is a neurological condition that starts off with psychosis. Catatonia progresses to seizure. And if it's not stopped, it results in coma and death very quickly.

It's dangerous, but it's also treatable. So that's how I became interested in catatonia. The second thing that meant that catatonia really caught my attention was that I met a couple of patients with catatonia in clinical practice, both of whom were incredibly unwell—the most unwell patients in the ward. But within a few weeks with treatment, they were able to leave hospital happy, lucid, able to return to their lives, and that kind of stark recovery was wonderful to see