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Wouter W. de Herder

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CASE REPORT



Clémentine Delait (1865–1934), the most famous bearded lady on the continent in the 20th century

Wouter W. de Herder 

Endocrine Oncology, Erasmus MC, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934), the Bearded Woman from Thaon-les-Vosges, France, did not suffer from her extreme hirsutism, but used it to her advantage. Her beard started to grow when she turned 18 and at the age of 25 she decided to stop shaving her beard and let it grow. She had regular menstrual cycles between ages 12 and 35. She was diagnosed with signs and symptoms of hyperandrogenism like hirsutism, impressive strength and muscularity and a deep voice, but also with morbid obesity. She never gave birth to a child. At the age of 39, she was officially allowed by the French Government to wear man's clothes. She suffered from rheumatism and died because of a stroke. The most probable cause of her hirsutism was polycystic ovary syndrome. Alternatively, an incomplete block in the adrenal steroid synthesis, like nonclassical 21-hydroxylase deficiency can be considered.

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Introduction

Human medicine uses different terminology to describe excessive hair growth, particularly in women. Hypertrichosis is excessive growth of hair in both males and females. Hirsutism is excessive growth of hair of normal or abnormal distribution in females and virilization is the development of male secondary sex characteristics (including facial and body hair) in females¹. Men dressed as females are generally called transvestites or drag queens.

The most common cause of hirsutism is the polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). Hirsutism can also present in combination with Cushing's syndrome and congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). Rarely it is caused by (malignant) androgen-secreting tumors in the ovaries, or in the adrenal cortex. Furthermore, several medications can cause hirsutism [1]. Emile C. Achard (1860–1944) and Joseph Thiers (1885–1960) are recognized for their first description of “diabète des femmes à barbe” (diabetes of the bearded women) in 1921: the combination of diabetes mellitus, deep masculine voice, hirsutism, clitoral hypertrophy and adrenal cortical hyperplasias, or adenomas mostly in post-menopausal women [2]. It has been generally agreed upon that their publication contains reports on patients with PCOS and Cushing's syndrome (ectopic adrenocorticotropin (ACTH) secretion?) [2]. Also geographical/ethnic differences exist: hirsutism is more frequent in women of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and South Asian ancestry.

One of the most famous bearded women was Magdalena Ventura from Abruzzi, Italy, who developed a beard at the age of 37. She gave birth to 7 children: 3 were born before the beard started to grow and 4 were born after she had grown the beard. In 1631, at the age of 52, she and her husband were pictured in a painting by the Spanish artist José de Ribera (1591–1652). In

the painting, which is currently at display in the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain, she is breastfeeding her most recently born child in 1631 [3,4]. Another famous hirsute woman is Saint Wilgefortis. According to a Medieval legend, she developed sudden hirsutism to prevent an unwanted marriage [5].

In the past centuries, circuses and fairs used to proudly present bearded women, many times healthy women with fake beards, but also presentations of true cases of bearded women are well-known. The controversial 26-year-old Austrian singer - drag queen Thomas Neuwirth won dressed as a bearded woman the Eurovision Song Contest in Copenhagen, Denmark on 10 May 2014. Media, reporters and audiences erroneously called him the singing bearded lady.

Clémentine delait

Clémentine Delait was born as Clémentine Clattaux on 5 March 1865 in Chaumousse, France. She was the daughter of Joseph Marie Clattaux and Marie-Anne Géhin. She had one older sister (Marie) and one older brother (Auguste) [6–9].

In 2005, Roland Marchal, a 79-year-old secondhand dealer and collector from Bellefontaine, France bought a school exercise book containing 50 pages of memoirs at a fair, including newspaper cuttings and photographs of Clémentine Delait (Figure 1). Most probably these were written up for her in 1934 by Paul Rambert, who at that time worked for a local newspaper in Epinal, France named “La Liberté de l'Est”. This precious document gives a good insight into the life of this extraordinary woman, who apparently did not suffer from her generous facial and body hair, but used it to her advantage [6–9].

According to her memoirs, her beard started to grow when she turned 18 in 1883. Initially she decided to shave herself. On



Figure 1. Portrait of Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934), the Bearded Woman from Thaon-les-Vosges. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).

25 September 1885, she married at the age of 20 with the baker Paul Delait (born 25 September 1855) in Thaon-les-Vosges, France and started working in the bakery. In 1892 they opened a pub/café in Thaon-les-Vosges. On the Sunday of Pentecost in 1900, Clémentine decided to stop shaving her beard and let it grow. The name of the café was: Café de la Femme à Barbe (The bearded woman's pub) [6–9].

In the Spring of 1904, the famous Dr. J. Edgar E. Bérillon (1859 – 1948), physician and psychologist - psychiatrist, working at "l'École de psychologie" in Paris and founder of the journal "Revue de l'hypnotisme" [10] released a medical report of Clémentine Delait when she was examined by him at the age of 35 [6–9]. He recorded that her menstrual cycles started at the age of 12 and continued regularly until the age of 35. She only complained of intermittent migraine headaches. She was very muscular and strong and weighted almost 100 kg, while her height was only 1.65 m. He described the presence of abundant hair growth also on the arms, chest and back apart from a full-grown beard. His colleague, the local physician from Thaon-les-Vosges, Dr. Galmard, had recorded the presence of normal external female organs [6–9].

According to her memoirs, Clémentine Delait met with another bearded woman in Paris in 1902. This lady most probably was Annie Jones Elliot (1865–1902) aka Esau Lady from Virginia, USA who toured Europe with the famous showman



Figure 2. Portrait of Annie Jones Elliot (1865–1902) aka Esau Lady from Virginia. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).

Phineas T. Barnum as a Barnum & Bailey Circus attraction (Figure 2). Clémentine was offered 2000 French Francs per week to work for Barnum, but instead she preferred to take care of her husband who was suffering from severe rheumatisms. A few months later, after the death of Annie Jones, Barnum returned to Epinal to offer Clementine Delait a large sum of money if she would travel with him to the USA to work in his shows, but again she turned down his offer. In 1903, at the fair in Thaon-les-Vosges, a lion show with the tamer Camilius attracted a lot of public. Here, Clémentine Delait was involved in a very daring act where she was in the lion cage together with the lions, but Camilius was always present in the cage as well (Figure 3). Of course, nothing bad happened [6–9].

In March 1904, shortly after the release of the medical report by Dr. Bérillon, she was officially permitted by Émile Combes, minister of Internal Affairs, to wear man's clothes [6–9]. In 1919, Clémentine and Paul adopted a daughter Fernande (born 1914), whose parents died of the Spanish flue. In 1923, Clémentine, Paul and Fernande, sold their cafe and moved from Thaon-les-Vosges to Plombières. She started a shop for embroideries, lingerie and lace, but also souvenir postcards were sold here [6–9].

In 1928, after the death of her husband, Clementine decided to enter the show world and started traveling together with her adopted daughter. She started in Paris and visited London, Belfast, Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam and many other places in Europe, Africa and South America. She closed her shop in

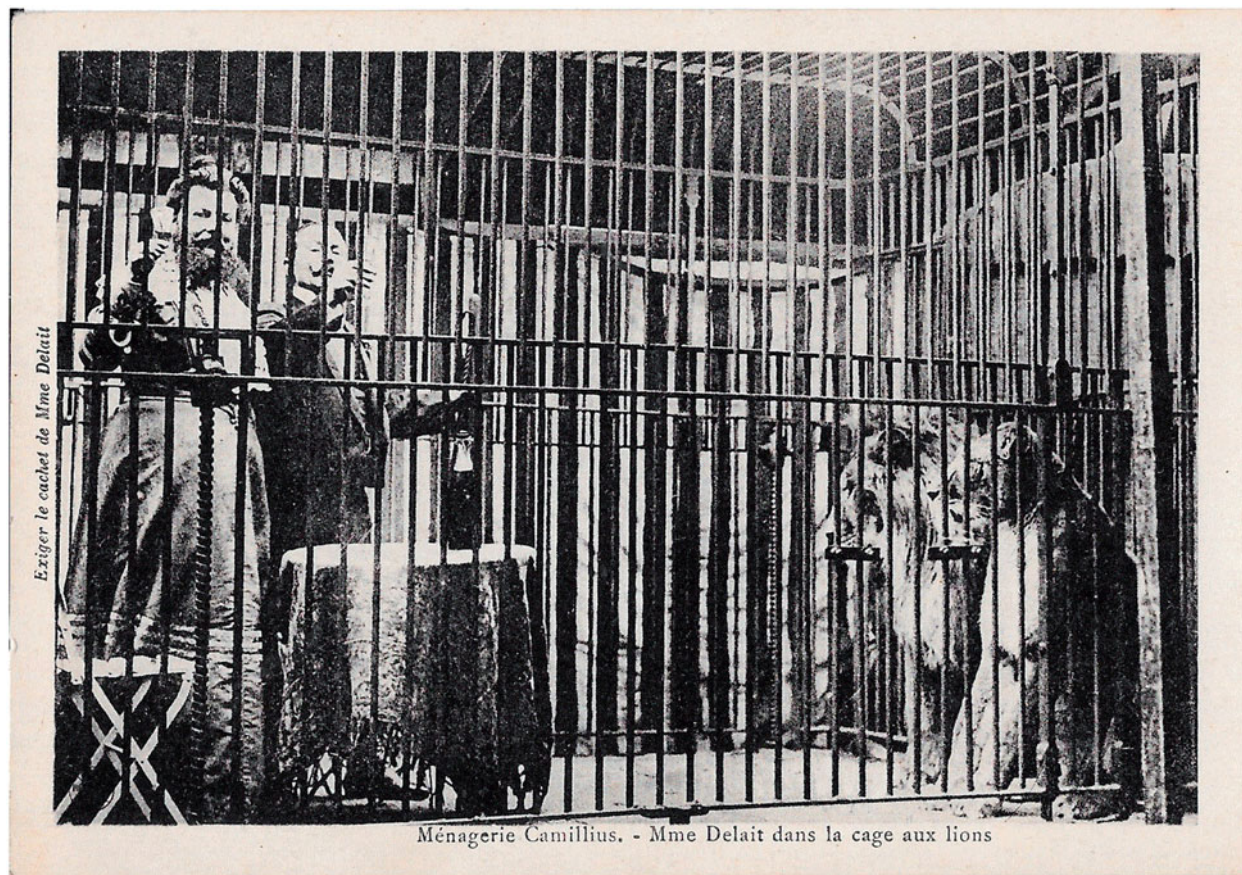


Figure 3. Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934) in the Lion cage of Camilius in Thaon-les-Vosges. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).

Plombières and finally moved back to Thaon-les-Vosges, where she opened a new bar named “the Palace-Bar”. In 1934 she stopped all her commercial activities also because of rheumatisms [6–9].

Clémentine Delait died at the age of 69 on 19 April 1934 from an acute stroke. Before her death she had written: when I arrive in paradise, I think I will say to St Peter: “my good St. Peter, in paradise I bet there is not a beard as beautiful as mine”. She added: will I dress for this ultimate journey as a woman or a man? who knows? in any case, on my tombstone I wish that one engraves: “Here rests Mrs. Delait, the Bearded Lady from Thaon”. She was buried at the cemetery in Thaon-les-Vosges [6–9]. In 1969, the community of Thaon-les-Vosges founded a museum dedicated to her [6–9]. During her life, more than 70 picture souvenir postcards with Clémentine Delait were signed and sold by her as advertisements and stamped with a dated and special Mme DELAIT THAON Vosges stamp. The pictures show her either in elegant women’s dresses (Figure 4), or dressed as a male in an elegant suit and bowler hat (Figure 5). She is depicted with her beloved dogs, or riding a bike, or driving a horse-drawn cart (Figure 6). Many times she is depicted in front of her first café: Café de la Femme a Barbe (Figure 6).

Other famous hirsute women

In the same era, other famous bearded hirsute women were touring Europe and the USA. Among the most famous were: the two bearded sisters Clémence (Proudhon) Frémont (1875–) and Berthe Frémont (1882–1951) from Bourth, France; Clémence (Lestienne) Clarissenote (1839–1919) from Boulogne-sur-Mer,



Figure 4. Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934) elegantly dressed as a woman. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).



Figure 5. Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934) elegantly dressed as a man. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).

France; Juliane Sleebus and Mathilde van de Cauter from Belgium; Baroness Sidonia de Barcsy (1866–1925) from Hungary – later she lived in the USA; Grace Hester Gilbert (1876–1924) from Ohio, USA and Annie Jones Elliot. At present, Harnaam Kaur, a model with a full beard, most probably caused by polycystic ovary disease, is like Clémentine Delait ultimately positive about her appearance. She currently holds the Guinness World Record as the youngest female with a full beard [11].

Medical explanation

We can only speculate on the cause of the hirsutism in Clémentine Delait. She developed hirsutism at the age of 18 and died at the age of 69. She also showed subtle other signs of hyperandrogenism like her muscular power and she had a deep voice as well. On the other hand she was morbidly obese (BMI 36 kg/m^2). She never became pregnant. She died of a cardiovascular - thromboembolic event. There were no other reported signs or symptoms of Cushing's syndrome (like: rounded (moon) face, peripheral muscular atrophy, easy bruisability, edema, or psychiatric/psychologic symptoms). These combinations do not fit with the diagnosis of Cushing's syndrome, nor with malignant disorders accompanied by hyperandrogenism, such as ovarian and adrenal tumors. The most probable diagnosis in this case still remains PCOS [12]. The obesity and cardiovascular problems fit well with this diagnosis. A second possibility is an incomplete block in the adrenal steroid synthesis (CAH), like nonclassical 21-hydroxylase (21OHD) deficiency [13].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



Figure 6. Clémentine Delait Clattaux (1865–1934) in a horse-drawn buggy in front of her Café de la Femme à Barbe (The bearded woman's pub) in Thaon-les-Vosges. (Postcard from the collection of W.W. de Herder).

ORCID

Wouter W. de Herder  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1463-5165>

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