The Use of the Terms Downs Syndrome and Mongoloids

The use of the word *Mongol* and *Mongloid* as terms for Down’s syndrome dates back to the 1860s, when a doctor called John Langdon Down published a paper, *Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots*, in which he asserted that it was possible to classify different types of conditions by ethnic characteristics. For example, study the face of “an idiot” and classify them by culture (e.g. Mongoloian).

Before 1860, someone with Down’s syndrome was simply classified as an idiot. In Ramsay’s documentary, Down’s biographer, Professor Connor Ward, explains how Down was a distinguished medic and was recruited by the Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots to work with those who had learning disabilities. Down noticed that those in a group of people he was treating shared a common appearance and it was then that he came up with his diagnosis of Mongolian Idiocy.

In his 1866 paper, Down wrote: “The great Mongolian family has numerous representatives [among his patients] and it is to this division that I wish in this paper to pay special attention. A very large number of congenital idiots are typical Mongols. So marked is this that when placed side-by-side it is difficult to believe that the specimens compared are not children of the same parents.”

Elsewhere, he writes about the roundness of the cheeks, the shape of the eyes and various other physical features and suggests that this group of children were a regression to a Mongolian ethnic type. There are no records which suggest that anyone of the Mongolian race was ever treated at Earlswood. Later, Down doubted his work. He abandoned his belief in *phrenology* (def. “the detailed study of the shape and size of the cranium as a supposed indication of character and mental abilities”) after 10 years of study and turned his back on the view that a person’s character and intelligence could be deduced from the outer appearance and shape of his or her head.

Yet the coining of his term continued.

Down’s contemporaries were also skeptical of his theories and started to use the term “so-called Mongolian idiot” in medical papers. For the next hundred years, Mongol was used to describe someone with Down’s syndrome.

It was only in 1959 after the French geneticist Jérôme Lejeune discovered the cause of Down’s syndrome (an extra copy of chromosome 21) that medics began to suggest using a different term to *Mongoloid* and *Mongol*. Esteemed geneticists of the day (including Down’s own grandson) wrote a joint letter to The Lancet, the world’s leading medical journal, insisting that the term was derogatory to Eastern races and requested a new name for the condition.

The nation of Mongolia itself also called for a revival. After becoming a member of the United Nations in 1961, it joined the World Health Organization in 1965 and asked for the term Mongoloid to be changed. From then on, the disorder became known as Down’s syndrome.

Mongol and Mongoloid remained in use in British hospitals until the 1980s. In the documentary, the author and filmmaker Sarah Boston recalls giving birth in 1975 and the doctor handing over her baby with the words, “Your child is a Mongol.” When she wrote a book about her experience of raising a child
with Down’s syndrome, the publishers wanted to use the word Mongol in the title. It was 1991. A native Mongolian, Uuganaa Ramsay, had a boy with Down’s syndrome in 2006. It was difficult for her to live in a country where the name for her native people was also an offensive slang term. She became involved with a survey conducted by Down’s syndrome Scotland, which found that the use of the word was still prevalent among teenagers. “It made me feel uncomfortable and upset,” she says. “It was derogatory. If you’re introducing yourself as a Mongol, people hear it differently. That has a big impact on self-confidence because people laugh. It’s not the same word anymore.”

In an attempt to escape these feelings and recapture the sense of pride that Ramsay used to have in being a Mongol, she returned to her home town for the first time in eight years in September. Her visit is captured in a television documentary and provides a spirited portrayal of the Mongolian people. It was important for Ramsay to present a true depiction of her countrymen and women to try to tackle any pre-existing negative notions of the Mongols.

“All Mongolians are freedom-loving people because of our innocent nomadic tradition of roaming freely and living with nature so harmoniously,” says Oyungerel Tsedevdamba, the Mongolian minister for culture, sports and tourism, in the documentary.

The country’s varied landscape includes rolling plateaus, sand dunes, alpine forests and glaciers and is evoked in the documentary through a series of dispatches. Ramsay visits family and friends, drinks vodka and makes dung-fueled fires. She tells listeners that people bring dairy products as gifts when visiting one another’s houses because the white represents purity and innocence.

“It’s just like anywhere else – there are happy people and grumpy people,” observes Ramsay. “But the sky is always blue and sunny and I think that makes people a bit happier. Then at night, you can see the most stars there.”

Ramsay’s son Billy lived until he was only three months old. In one emotional scene in the documentary, she shows photos of her son to her family in Zavkhan. “When someone passes away in Mongolia, they say he becomes a god,” she tells us. Most Mongolian people are unaware about the wider use of Mongol around the globe. “But in Mongolia we don’t face that issue as everyone is a Mongol here,” Tsedevdamba points out.

Now, Ramsay wants to put an end to the slang use of Mongol. And, for her, that means reclaiming its original meaning with pride. “I don’t want the word to be banned, but I want people to know you use Mongol in the same way as you would refer to a Scot, a Turk, a Pole,” she says in the documentary.

“We can unlearn negative connotations because we learnt them. You can call me Mongol, because I am.”

From “Why are the words ‘Mongol’, ‘Mongoloid’ and ‘Mongy’ still bandied about as insults?” by Gillian Orr in The Independent Newspaper.