

House Painter

A 46-year-old house painter is admitted to the hospital with a history of 30 years of heavy drinking. He has had two previous admissions for detoxification, but his family states that he has not had a drink in several weeks and he shows no signs of alcohol withdrawal. He looks malnourished, however, and on examination is found to be ataxic and to have a bilateral sixth cranial nerve palsy. He appears confused and mistakes one of his physicians for a dead uncle.

Within a week the patient walks normally, and there is no longer any sign of a palsy. He seems less confused and can now find his way to the bathroom without direction. He remembers the names and birthdays of his siblings, but has difficulty naming the past five United States presidents. More strikingly, he has great difficulty in retaining information for longer than a few minutes. He can repeat a list of numbers immediately after he has heard them, but a few minutes later does not recall being asked to perform the task. Shown three objects (keys, comb, ring), he cannot recall them 3 minutes later. He does not seem worried about this. Asked if he can recall the name of his doctor, he replies, "Certainly," and proceed to call the doctor "Dr. Masters" (not his real name), whom, he claims, he first met in the Korean War. He tells a long untrue story about how he and "Dr. Masters" served as fellow soldiers.

The patient is calm, alert, and friendly. Because of his intact immediate memory and spotty but sometimes adequate remote memory, one can be with him for a short period and not realize he has a severe memory impairment. Although treated with high doses of thiamine, the short-term memory deficit persists and appears to be irreversible.