Down's Syndrome: The History of a Disability (Biographies of Disease)

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For 150 years, Down Syndrome has constituted the archetypal mental disability, easily recognisable by distinct facial anomalies and physical stigmata. In a narrow medical sense, Down Syndrome is a common disorder caused by the presence of all or part of an extra 21st chromosome. It is named after John Langdon Down, the British asylum medical superintendent who described the syndrome as 'Mongolism' in a series of lectures in 1866. In 1959, the disorder was identified as a chromosome 21 trisomy by the French paediatrician and geneticist Jï¿½rï¿½me Lejeune and has since been known as Down Syndrome (in the English-speaking world) or Trisomy 21 (in many European countries). But children and adults born with this chromosomal abnormality have an important collective history beyond their evident importance to the history of medical science.

David Wright, a Professor in the History of Medicine at McMaster University, looks at the care and treatment of individuals with Down Syndrome - described for much of history as 'idiots', - from Medieval Europe to the present day. The discovery of the genetic basis of the condition and the profound changes in attitudes, care, and early identification of Down Syndrome in the genetic era, reflects the fascinating medical and social history of the disorder.

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