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# Your Nose Won't Tell

By W. Montague Cobb

THE large but indeterminate number of American citizens whose security in their daily occupations is dependent upon the fact that their lineaments and hair do not suggest the negroid contribution to their ancestry, might be rendered uneasy by the following statement on page 146 of Victor Heiser's, "An American Doctor's Odyssey," published in August, 1936:

"That they (Philippine Negritos) were true Negroes was shown by the one piece cartilage in their spreading noses; all other races have a split cartilage. Even the octoroons show this negroid character which is regarded as a reliable test of Negro blood."

This uneasiness might be heightened to alarm at the expansion which appeared shortly afterward in the first November issue of *Collier's Weekly*:

"Thousands of Negroes, particularly octoroons, whose blood is seven-eighths 'white,' cannot be distinguished from white persons except through an examination of the cartilage in their noses. This nasal tissue is in one piece in Negroes and is split in all other races."

After consulting professional opinion, Hilmar L. Jensen, alert secretary of the Colored Community Branch of the Y.M.C.A., Trenton, N. J., challenged the magazine statement and received the following reply from *Collier's*:

"The statement that the nasal tissue is in one piece in Negroes and split in all other races comes from Dr. Victor G. Heiser, One, Madison Avenue, New York City. He says that he has found this to be true in the 'countless' nasal examinations he has made throughout the world, as well as having read the statement in several books on biology. As I, and everyone else on *Collier's* have the utmost faith in the doctor's intelligence and integrity, I did not and still do not believe that this fact needs additional verification. —Freling Foster."

Fortunately, in science it is neither heresy nor bad manners to question the accuracy of any proposition in the absence of convincing proof and Mr. Jensen need not go stand in a corner as *Collier's* would seem to suggest. Because the casual statements of distinguished authors are so often disseminated as gospel truth by the lay press with potential unfortunate results, this particular pronouncement is examined objectively in that constructive spirit which places truth above authority.

In her Harvard study of Negro-White families, Mrs. C. B. Day was unable to find any quadroons (one-quarter Negro blood, twice as much as octoroon) whose facial features would not permit them easily to pass for white.<sup>1</sup> The possibilities of a test detecting Negro blood in much higher dilution by so simple a means as inspection of the external nose would be very intriguing, if the test

***The white folks grow more and more curious about the down-trodden Negro. First it was the skull, then the brain-weight, then the pupil of the eye, then the fingernails, then the leg muscles of our athletes. Now it is the nose. Dr. Cobb has an amusing answer to the justly famed Dr. Victor Heiser***

worked, but we are not given the information necessary for a proper check.

Neither Dr. Heiser's nor the magazine's statements tell us anything about the split itself or the evidence for its alleged race linkage in heredity, and no references are given. The phenomenon is not mentioned in the standard texts on anatomy and physical anthropology or in the comprehensive monographs of I. C. Wen<sup>2</sup> on the form and development of the nasal cartilages in monkeys, apes and men, and of A. H. Schultz<sup>3</sup> on the relations of the external nose to the bony nose and nasal cartilages in whites and Negroes. We have thus only a conclusion to examine and not the data upon which it was or might be based.

## Two Errors

We believe that Dr. Heiser has erred twice, first, in that the anatomical feature to which he apparently refers is not a split cartilage, and second, in that this feature is easily shown not to have the hereditary relationship which he claims for it.

On the skin between the nostrils of many people may be seen a definite groove, the medial septal sulcus, which sometimes broadens toward the tip of the nose giving the effect of a notch or dent in the latter, the medial apical sulcus. This groove, it is presumed, was taken as the indication of a "split" cartilage. The absence of the groove would then mean a "one piece" cartilage. Neither assumption could be correct.

The noses of all human beings have the same five principal cartilages, two roof, two wing, and a septal, arranged according to the same basic plan, which is found in apes and monkeys as well. Differences in nasal form, racial or individual, are due to differences in the size and form of the cartilages and bony bridge of the nose. The morphology and development of the nasal cartilages are well known. No "split" cartilage occurs in any monkey, ape or man.

The groove described indicates the interval between the inner limbs of the wing cartilages of the two nostrils. If the skin and subcutaneous tissue are thick, or the inner limbs of the cartilages lie close together, no groove will be seen on the surface. The same cartilages

are present, whether or not there is a groove in the skin. The septal sulcus is thus a more superficial trait than the cartilages which produce it. The variation, racial incidence and heredity transmission of the sulcus are by no means established.

Lehmann-Nitsche<sup>4</sup> found the sulcus in only a few males of large numbers of whites, and not at all in South American Indians. Schultz<sup>5</sup> states that "it does not appear to be so rare in whites and is not limited to the male sex." He had never seen it in an American Negro. The sulcus does occur in the American Negro, however, in both septal and special forms, and in poorly marked degree is not uncommon.

If we are correct in assuming that Dr. Heiser took the presence of the medial septal sulcus as indicative of a split cartilage, his conclusion might still be a contribution were it not for the fact that most whites and orientals do not have the sulcus and some American Negroes, with less than three-fourths white blood do.

## Deeper Groove in Whites

It may be and probably is true that the groove is more frequent and better marked in white peoples. Schultz<sup>6</sup> found that a short septal cartilage permitted the inner limbs of the wing cartilages to come into contact beneath it in the Negro, but that these were held apart by a longer septal cartilage in the white, except in concave noses. Here the direct association is more plausibly with nasal form and not with race.

It would be most extraordinary if a superficial trait like the medial septal groove showed the strong negative race-linked inheritance attributed to it, but obviously this is not the case.

Dr. Heiser's book is a very entertaining description of adventure and service. There is no indication that it was intended to be a scientific reference and its use as such is perhaps best not attempted.

In any case, available anatomical and anthropological knowledge indicates quite clearly: that no cartilage is known to split in any human nose; and that the presence or absence of the median septal or apical sulcus is not a criterion for the presence of Negro blood. They who profit from lack of pigmentation may proceed with confidence. Their noses may know, but they won't tell.

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5. Op. cit.
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