

Rare vision condition found

WASHINGTON (AP) — For one middle-aged man, "two" looks blue, but "2" is orange. And while "3" appears pink, "5" is green.

The man has synesthesia — a phenomenon in which printed words and numbers burst with color, flavors take on shapes and the spoken language turns into a mental rainbow.

For some people with synesthesia, say researchers, a newspaper is never black and white — it is red, orange, blue, beige, pink and green all over.

"This is an alternate perception," said Thomas J. Palmeri, a Vanderbilt University psychologist and the first author of a study reporting on the tests given to one man. "He is normal — a highly successful, intelligent man and he suffers no problems from this unique wiring of the brain."

The study, appearing Tuesday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, explores multi-chromatic world of a man identified only as W.O. The man, a university professor of medicine, did not respond to requests for a direct interview.

Palmeri said researchers are starting to realize that W.O. is just one of a large

number of people with synesthesia, many of whom take joy in this rich symphony of sensations.

"They often experience a great deal of pleasure from this altered perception," said Edward M. Hubbard, a synesthesia researcher at the University of California, San Diego.

For W.O., his synesthesia helped make learning the complex words of science easy — when the colors were not distracting him from study, Palmeri said.

"He sees a palette of different colors when he reads and sometimes he is more interested in how pretty the page looks than what the words say," he said.

In the Proceedings study, Palmeri, Randolph Blake and other Vanderbilt researchers put W.O. through a series of tests.

Palmeri said that W.O. sees all printed words in colors, sometimes letter-by-letter and sometimes syllable-by-syllable. Short words have a single color while long words may have many. When W.O. was given a list of 100 words printed in black and white, he said each one had a specific color. When the list was presented a second time, weeks later, W.O. gave most

words the same color, missing only some that were either beige or off-white.

"These associations are highly reliable," said Blake. "W.O. says that the colors have stayed the same all his life and our observations lend credence to the claim."

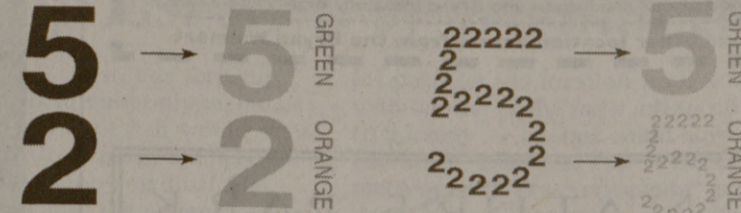
In W.O.'s view, each numeral, except for zero and one, has a color even if printed in black and white.

When the researchers presented an image of the number 5 made up of much smaller number 2s, W.O. saw the whole image as a five and it appeared green. However, when he looked at the small 2s that made up the image, each of those numerals were orange.

When the numbers were written out — such as two — they assumed another color.

Black, white and full of color

Synesthesia is a rare visual condition in which a person sees and hears words and numerals in color even if they're in black and white. Researchers are trying to determine where in the brain process these associations take place.



Visual processing

When a person with synesthesia sees a number 5, they see it as green. They see the number 2 as orange.

Conceptual processing

When shown a 5 constructed of small 2s, they see the 5 as green until they realize it is made of 2s, at which point it appears orange.

SOURCE: Department of Psychology, Vanderbilt University

AP

And the hues prompted when W.O. hears words are generally the same as those he sees when the words are printed, Palmeri said.

Hubbard said the experiments with W.O. match some performed in his lab that show synesthetes see colors when others see only black and white.

New InSync pacemaker reduces patient's risk of hospitalization

ATLANTA (AP) — Heart failure victims who get a new kind of pacemaker have only half the usual risk of being hospitalized with worsening heart trouble, researchers say.

The device, Medtronic's InSync pacemaker, has been implanted in more than 3,000 people in the United States since its approval by the Food and Drug Administration in August.

It is intended for people

with a particular form of heart failure, a debilitating illness in which people suffer shortness of breath because their hearts do not beat strongly enough. Overall, an estimated 5 million Americans have heart failure, and it is considered to be the only major form of heart trouble that is growing in prevalence.

Dr. David Meyerson of Johns Hopkins University, a spokesperson for the American Heart Association,

estimates that 10 percent of heart failure patients whose symptoms are not relieved by medicines could benefit from the new pacemakers.

"For those patients, this is a potentially exciting adjunct to our current therapies," he said.

The latest data on the pacemaker were released Monday by Dr. William Abraham of the University of Kentucky at a meeting in Atlanta of the American College of Cardiology,

Doctors helping solve heart artery problems

ATLANTA (AP) — Doctors believe they have solved one of the most frustrating problems in heart care — the stubborn tendency of heart arteries to clog up after angioplasty.

New data released Sunday suggest the approach virtually eliminates this complication, which occurs in about one-quarter of angioplasties — now done on 1 million Americans annually.

The approach is the drug-coated stent, a wire coil engineered to prop open the artery

and keep it from refilling with scar tissue.

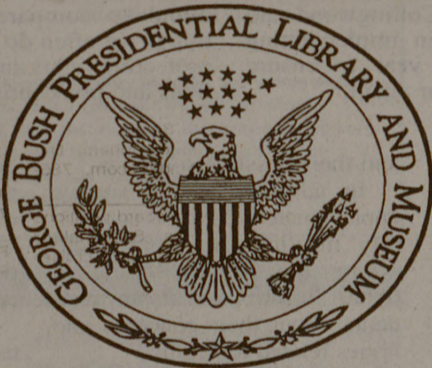
"This is a very hot topic, potentially revolutionary in the treatment of coronary artery disease," said Dr. Spencer King III of Emory University.

During angioplasty, doctors fish tiny balloons through clogged heart arteries, then inflate them briefly to open up blood flow. The tendency of the freshly opened artery to close up again with scar tissue within a few months has always been its major drawback.

Doctors have tried a variety

of gadgets, such as lasers and whirling knives, to prevent this complication, called restenosis. The introduction of ordinary stents a few years ago was a big improvement, reducing the failure rate from around 40 percent to about 25 percent.

However, the latest advance has the potential of eliminating it almost completely. The first hint of this was made public last September at a European heart conference, and more data were released Sunday at a meeting of the American College of Cardiology in Atlanta.



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