Good Brain, Bad Brain: Parkinson's Disease
Future Learn Free Online Course ***Feedback from Helen Harris, 5.11.15***

Future Learn is a private company wholly owned by the Open University and launched in 2013. It involves a large number of worldwide contributing partners – teaching and research institutions as well as specialist organisations such as the British Museum. Future Learn offers a diverse selection of courses from these partners "delivered one step at a time and accessible on mobile, tablet and desktop computer."

The University of Birmingham has created an online course about Parkinson's, first made available this October and titled as above. It is one of three in a *Good Brain, Bad Brain* series, the others being *Basics* and *Drug Origins*. The courses *are* available after their initial launch and completion but without interactive feedback from the tutor. The Branch's attention was drawn to the PD course via an email from Parkinson's UK to Ken Bowler, Chair of the Edinburgh Research Interest Group.

I mentioned the course in the Branch November Newsletter also wanting to draw attention to the wealth of other courses offered by Future Learn on all manner of topics. I have now completed the PD course which has three sections introduced over 3 consecutive weeks, taking 2 to 3 hours for each section (you can break off at any time). Ken suggested my feedback would be appreciated and if any others have completed the course I'm sure Ken would welcome *their* feedback.

The course is aimed at "anyone who wants to find out the fundamentals of Parkinson's disease – how Parkinson's disease affects people; what causes it; what we can do to try to ameliorate the symptoms; and what we don't yet know about it. You will need to have a basic knowledge of what the brain is made of, how these component cellular parts are organised and the principles of how these cells function" which ERIG members are likely to have and probably the broader Branch membership. The material covers the parts of the brain involved in movement – the basal ganglia, the striatum and the motor cortex and how these come into play through different **pathways**, the role of dopamine producing neurones, how the main drug regimens work to relieve the symptoms and some limited mention of research approaches around dopaminergic cell death, Lewy bodies, alpha-synuclein theory as well as the limitations of current research models. It uses short video lectures and written material.

There are information-seeking tasks to complete but these are not obligatory. I felt the posed tasks had the potential to lead the less clinically knowledgeable into territories that become somewhat mind boggling but it is aimed at a mixed audience. Each stage of learning within any one week has the opportunity for you to post comments (as well as your answers to tasks) and this can prove interesting in terms of people's PD experience and information provision from *their* fact-finding (as well

as possible struggles). Participants are diverse – people with PD, family members, medical students, nurses and other health professionals.

I have an understanding of anatomy and physiology and have been adding to my knowledge of PD in a random fashion through being a volunteer with the Branch for the last three years. The course has filled some gaps, particularly about the involvement of the striatum and the more complex aspect of pathways BUT the best thing by far to have come out of working through the material is to have been made aware (by one of the participants) of the series of videos available from the **Khan Academy** on the subject of Parkinson's. This is an American inspired organisation similar to Future Learn.

There are eleven videos each about 8 to 10 minutes long. They go into more details about the pathways but the style of teaching is such that I could cope. They involve doodle-type animation in the form of someone writing, drawing and rubbing out on a blackboard. The tutor uses very helpful analogies, the voice is friendly, humerous and although at quite a fast pace, because of the tie-up with the illustrations and writing it all comes together. Thanks to *these* videos I have learned much more about the complex pathways and the complexities of drug use because of them – I don't feel I need to remember it all – I get the general picture. I encourage you to have a look by starting here:

http://www.khanacademy.org/science/health-and-medicine/nervous-system-diseases