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Sketching a cultural history of the vagus nerve

From the Latin *vagus*, meaning wanderer or vagrant, the vagus nerve – also known as the vagal nerve – is the tenth cranial nerve. The vagus nerve is a pair of nerves that acts as a key connector of brain, heart, lungs, and abdominal organs. It is the main component of the parasympathetic nervous system, as well as a central part of the microbiome-gut-brain axis. The nerve has emerged as an object of fascination in recent years. The production of discourses on this nerve extends from scores of self-help books that promise to help readers ‘activate’, ‘unleash’, and ‘soothe’ the vagus nerve, to wellness accounts on social media that aim to coach users through exercises and movements that can reset and balance the vagus nerve, and online media articles on the possibilities of the nerve. Achieving mental wellness or mental balance is positioned as a significant capability of the vagus nerve. However, despite its importance in the medical practice and its circulation in popular culture, less is known about the vagus nerve’s trajectories in medical and health history. This paper aims to sketch a cultural history of the vagus nerve and its connections to mental health. It draws on a range of archival and popular sources to critically examine the recent interest in the vagus nerve and its implications for understandings of mental health.