

Editorial

Nazi Eponyms in Medicine

Eponym is a name generally derived from a person, which refers to a particular event, place, thought or a discovery. In medicine, eponym is often a 'name giver' for a particular disease syndrome, a method or a concept. For example, Sjogren syndrome refers to a disease syndrome with specified manifestations originally described by Sjogren. On the other hand, Koch's postulates consist of definite principles described by Robert Koch which describe the microorganism infection relationship.

Medicine somehow is full of eponymous terminology. It was a common practice in the past to recognize a person by immortalizing his/her name with eponymous characterization. It may also indicate the relative inadequacy of knowledge and understanding about the particular discovery which could have better described the disease.

Some of the eponyms have gained notoriety in the recent past in their association with infamous and unethical names belonging to the Nazi period of second World War. The Nazi approach to eugenics based on phenogenetic concept had focused on the theory of 'racial hygiene'.¹ As a result, there is a global hue and cry to delete such eponyms which tend to remind the principles of eugenics and glorify their devious origin to the blatantly criminal acts during the Nazi regime in Germany. Strong arguments have been successfully put forward for the need of the change.^{2,3}

Dr Joseph Rudolf Mengele is the most familiar name of that era.⁴ Known as the 'Angel of Death', Mengele used the inmates of concentration camps for human experimentation, particularly identical twins. He almost ran a butcher shop sacrificing numerous children, girls and pregnant women. He was more of a mad man than a doctor. It was rather ironical that he was considered as a medical scientist, could never be punished for his sins during his life. Thankfully, there is no eponym in medicine bearing his name.

That however cannot be said for several others who were Nazi associates, but more serious medical investigators. Reiter's syndrome and Wegener's granulomatosis are two important immunological diseases which have brought the discussion to the forefront.⁵⁻⁷ Reiter's syndrome, an autoimmune inflammatory condition is associated with joint pains (arthritis) as well as the inflammation of the eyes and the urinary tract. It is sometimes also associated with skin lesions. The disease was first described by Hans Conrad Reiter, hence named as Reiter syndrome. Reiter, awarded a posthumous Knight's Cross, was a strong proponent of eugenics. He had authorized medical experiments on prisoners in the concentration camps leading to the death of thousands.⁵ Reiter's syndrome has been now renamed as 'reactive arthritis' once the Nazi connections were widely known.⁶

Wegener's granulomatosis is the disease involving the lungs, eyes and the kidneys. The disease which causes inflammation of the small blood vessels of these organs is an important clinical condition. It was described by a pathologist Fredrick Wegener, a high ranking military doctor of German army and a member of the Nazi Party. He continued to command a respect and recognition long after the Second World War, was honored as a 'Master Clinician' in 1989 by the American College of Chest Physicians. It was later that his Nazi association was discovered which raised a global debate in medical circles.⁷ He was also suspected to have participated in human experiments in the concentration camps. The American College of Chest Physicians subsequently in 2000 stripped him of the Master Clinician prize. The disease Wegener's granulomatosis has now been rechristened since 2011 as 'granulomatosis with polyangiitis' in a joint consensus of several international medical associations.^{8,9}

There are other less common examples with similar background. Spatz-Stiefler reaction seen in the presence of a neurological syndrome 'paralysis agitans' forms the basis of the test for its fast anatomical diagnosis. The reaction was described by Hugo Spatz who was accused of directing the killing of over 150 mentally ill prisoners to remove their brains for research.^{2,10} The reaction was renamed as 'paralysis agitans reaction'. Cauchois-Eppinger-Frugoni syndrome is characterized by thrombosis of the portal vein draining the liver which has been renamed as 'portal vein thrombosis'. Hans Eppinger was a famous liver specialist who treated Joseph Stalin and Queen Marie of Romania. His association with Nazi prison camps was recognized in 2002. He had performed unethical tests on Gypsy prisoners at Dachau concentration camps, by testing the use of only the sea water as their source of fluids.¹¹ He was initially honored not only by the eponyms, such as the Cauchois-Eppinger-Frugoni syndrome and Eppinger's spider naevus, but also by institution of Eppinger Prize for outstanding contributions to liver research and naming of the lunar crater Euclides D. All those eponyms now stand cancelled.

Almost 30 neurological eponyms have been described as associated with the Nazi era.¹² Julius Hallervorden associated with Hallervorden-Spaz disease, a neurodegenerative disease, admitted that he removed brain material from euthanasia victims in the Brandenburg psychiatric institution.¹³ Franz Seitelberger who got his PhD under the supervision of Julius Hallervorden (cited above), described Seitelberger disease (infantile neuroaxonal dystrophy).¹² Hans Scherer, associated with a syndromic eponym for cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis was also directly involved in studies on brain of 300 Polish and German children euthanatized in a psychiatric clinic.¹⁴ Murad Ibrahim associated with congenital cutaneous candidiasis (Beck-Ibrahim disease) had also supported the Nazi euthanasia program in the killing of sick and mentally ill children considered 'unworthy to live'.² Walter Stoeckel, known for some of his surgical operations and sutures in obstetrics and gynecology, such as for pubovaginal sling operation and radical vaginal hysterectomy, was a strong supporter of Hitler and cooperated with the Nazis for the expulsion of Jewish doctors.¹⁵ All these eponyms are now discredited, should vanish from medical literature.

More recently, it is the Clara cell and Clara secretory protein (CSP) which have come into disrepute.¹⁶ Clara cells are a special type of cells present in the luminal lining of the bronchioles—the small airways of the lungs. Max Clara, a German anatomist who described the cells and the CSP in 1937 was an active Nazi whose research findings, based on the tissues of the executed prisoners from Dresden (Germany), were linked to the Nazi system. Several groups have now taken up the cause to remove the memory of the notorious name.^{16,17} It is quite likely that alternate names, such as club cell and the club cell secretory protein, will soon be adopted after due deliberations.

Most of these eponyms have been used for decades, sometimes for well over half a century. Why should they be changed now when a large population of medical students may not even be aware of the holocaust of the Nazi medical crimes? There are strong arguments however put forward by those who do not like to see the blots on the face of medicine. The medical history of the era with a lot of guilt and crime cannot be written off or even forgotten. The eponyms not only glorify the persons associated with these names but also revive the stories of their horrendous experiments and inhuman practices. They also tend to rub the salt on the wounds of the affected communities and the nations. They are, therefore, better buried in the oblivion as and when an unethical association is discovered. In any case, there are reasons to do without the eponyms in modern medicine. It is generally erroneous to associate a development or a discovery with a single name. Diseases are best labeled by the scientific terms than after the names of the individuals.

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