

CORRESPONDENCE

This department is provided for the publication of informal communications which are of interest because they are informative or stimulating, and for the discussion of controversial matters.

6 THE HANSEN-NEISSER CONTROVERSY

TO THE EDITOR:

It is desired to call the attention of the readers of THE JOURNAL to my objections to an article by one John Henry Richter, in the *A. M. A. Archives of Dermatology* 71 (1955) 92-94, written in commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Albert Neisser. It gives such a distorted and misleading picture of Armauer Hansen's discovery of the leprosy bacillus that it should not pass unchallenged.

Armauer Hansen observed the leprosy bacillus sometime before 1873 (actual date uncertain) and published his discovery in 1874. The description of the bacillus is classical in its simplicity and lucidity. He observed it in wet preparations, fresh and colored with osmic acid; other coloring methods were unknown at that time.

Hansen's view of leprosy as an infectious and not hereditary disease was based on thorough epidemiological investigations in the field. The results of these investigations and his discovery of the leprosy bacillus were published in 1874 (*Undersøgelse angaaende Spedalskhedens Aarsager, Christiania, 1874*).

It was no mere coincidence that this very important discovery was made in Bergen. Modern leprosy research had been founded here by Danielssen and Boeck over 20 years before (1847). When, in January 1868, the young Hansen became attached to the new and, for that time, up-to-date leprosy hospitals in Bergen, he came to a scientific milieu which, as things were then, was both active and well-established.

It was therefore only natural that Albert Neisser chose to go to Norway, and especially to Bergen, to study leprosy. He was well received by the Norwegian leprologists, and Hansen showed him all his material and discussed the whole problem thoroughly with him. When Neisser returned to Germany he had with him, as a gift from Hansen, a rich material from leprosy patients. Neisser then stained his sections by means of the new Weigert methods and could therefore demonstrate prettier preparations than Hansen had so far been able to make. He published his findings later that year (1879), and in this article he stated expressly that the bacillus had previously been observed and described by Hansen. I would point out that whereas Hansen in 1874 based his revolutionary view of the etiology of the disease on his epidemiological studies and his

observation of the bacillus, Neisser in 1879 confined himself to describing Norwegian preparations colored by means of a new method.

Richter speaks of "Hansen's unsuccessful attempts at proving conclusively that the bacilli seen by Hansen in 1873 in leprosy skin were indeed the cause of leprosy." Shortly after that, in connection with Hansen's 1880 article [*Virchow's Archivs* 79 (1880) 32-42], he speaks of "[Hansen's] unsuccessful experiments of 1873. . . ." The meaning of that I am at a loss to understand. If he means that Hansen did not cultivate the bacillus, or transfer the disease to animals, that is something which nobody has succeeded in doing yet. Neisser in 1879 did not claim priority in finding and describing the leprosy bacillus; there is not the slightest trace of polemics about this in his article. Nor is Hansen's German publication of 1880 in any way polemical towards Neisser. He gives Neisser full credit for the methods he had employed. On the other hand, Hansen comments sharply on a Swedish physician, one Dr. Eklund, who had visited Bergen just before Neisser did, and who on the basis of preparations obtained from Hansen had described microbes from leprosy patients as if they were his own discovery.

It is a disservice to Albert Neisser's memory when priority is claimed on his behalf for a discovery he did not make, and did not claim to have made.

—R. MELSON

[That the situation between Hansen and Neisser was not quite as serene as Dr. Melson believes it to have been will be seen from an article by Fite and Wade which appears in this issue.—EDITOR.]