

CORRESPONDENCE

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HANSEN'S FIRST OBSERVATION AND PUBLICATION CONCERNING THE BACILLUS OF LEPROSY

TO THE EDITOR:

There has been a certain amount of confusion about two features of Armauer Hansen's discovery of the leprosy bacillus: (1) the manner of publication of the 1874 report in which he told about it, and (2) the time when he first observed the bacilli. Incidentally, there are certain discrepancies in my article on the subject in *THE JOURNAL* [31 (1963) 74-80]. This confusion is due to the peculiar manner in which the Norwegian Medical Society, to which the report was presented, published it.

That society, in 1871, made a grant to Hansen to support his study of leprosy. His report, which I have been told by members of his family was sent to Christiania (now Oslo) in the autumn of 1873, consisted for the most part of data supporting his belief in the contagious nature of the disease, but it contained information also about his observation of bacilli in lesions.¹ The council of this society considered this report so important that they decided to give it special status in their journal, the *Norsk Magazin for Laegevidenskaben*. It appeared as No. 9 of Volume 4 of the then current Series 3, but with separate pagination; No. 8 ended with page 544, and No. 10 started with page 545. No. 9, which contains 88 pages (1-88), plus pp. I-LII devoted to case reports of 69 families with leprosy, is therefore to be regarded as a supplementary number for 1874. The report also exists as a separate publication, the title page of which is reproduced with this letter.

For further clarification, it may be noted that Series 1 of the *Norsk Magazin for Laegevidenskaben* ran from 1840 to 1846, Series 2 from 1847 to 1870, and Series 3 from 1871 to 1885. There were two other series between 1886 and 1923, after which only the volume numbers were given, without any series number. When, in 1939, a new Scandinavian medical journal appeared, *Nordisk Medicin*, the older periodical merged with it.

As for the year in which Hansen first observed the bacillus, I have long been convinced that it was 1873. When I was informed that Patrick Feeny, in his recently-published book,² had not only given that year but also the date and the name of the patient concerned (and the same data for two others), Dr. Ernest Glück and I went to the Hansen Memorial Room where the old case records are kept.

There we found those of two of the patients mentioned by Feeny, although the names of both had been misspelled. That of "Güll" is really "Giil," who was 12 years old when admitted to the Pleiestiftelsen

¹This part of the report has been reprinted, in translation, in *THE JOURNAL* [23 (1955) 307-309].

²FEENY, P. *The Fight Against Leprosy*, London and Toronto, 1964 (p. 65).

on August 27, 1866, and died on January 31, 1874. For the patient called "Anne Sahingetar," we found the record of Anne Saekkingstad, who was admitted on December 17, 1871 and died on March 11, 1873. Nothing was found about a postmortem examination. To find further data would take much time.

It appears that Feeny's information, including the spelling of the names, was obtained from an article by Hansen entitled "The Bacillus of Leprosy," which was published in 1880 in the *Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science* (Vol. 20, pp. 92-102). The two other articles by Hansen that appeared in the same year under virtually the same title, one in Norwegian in *Nord. Med. Arch.* [12 (1880) No. 3, pp. 1-10], and the other in German in *Virchow's Archiv.* [79 (1880) 32-42], have been examined and found identical with the one in English cited.

The purpose of this thrice-published article, written after Neisser's 1879 article³ had appeared, was partly to assert Hansen's priority in the discovery of the bacillus. First it tells of the search of the blood of leprosy patients for anything significant, and then (to quote), "After having employed myself for a lengthened period in these investigations of the blood, I proceeded to those of the tubercles, and shall communicate, as follows, a few of the memoranda I made during that time." He does this in considerable detail, on what, it seems, was a consecutive series of specimens examined in various ways, each for several days, the total covering a period of about three months.

Hansen did not state specifically that these were actually the *first* observations of rods in the little brown bodies, but it seems safe to assume that they probably were. If he had seen them before, he would not have spent much time on the blood, at that time, as he said he had. It may therefore be concluded that it was in early 1873 that Hansen's first observations of the bacillus of leprosy were made.

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³NEISSER, A. Zur Aetiologie der Lepra, Breslau ärztl. Ztschr. 1 (1879) 200-202, 214-215.