

Nomenclature for Leprosy

TO THE EDITOR:

The signs and symptoms of the mildly communicable disease caused by Hansen's bacillus are not found in the Bible and certainly do not correspond to "Zaraat" as described in chapter 13 of Leviticus or other chapters of the Old Testament, as any specialist will easily find out.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6} They do not correspond, either, to its Greek translation "lepra," which only meant, vaguely, a group of scaly dermatoses such as tinea, psoriasis, etc., and probably had the same meaning as "Zaraat"

viz., defilement and degradation before God. Faulty translations and connotations through the ages, and tolerance of the early doctors (Danielssen and Boeck among the exceptions), who did not react against the application of the vague but terrific "leprosy" label to the newly created nosologic entity, have given our generation that Trojan present: a name whose only effect was the disgracing of millions of people, hindering tremendously all modern technics for prevention and treatment.

But we, who are specialists, still insist on keeping that "tragic name of leprosy"

¹ COCHRANE, R. G. Biblical leprosy. A suggested interpretation. *The Life of Faith* **80** (1956) No. 3474, 19 January. *Reprinted in Carville Star* **15** (1956) 1-3 (No. 15).

² COCHRANE, R. G. The history of leprosy and its spread throughout the world. *In Leprosy in Theory and Practice*. Cochrane, R. G. and Davey, T. F., eds. Bristol, John Wright & Sons, Ltd.; Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins Co., 2nd ed., 1964, pp. 1-2.

³ GOLDMAN, L., MORAITES, R. S. and KITZMILLER, K. W. White spots in biblical times. *Arch. Dermat.* **93** (1966) 744-753.

⁴ JEANSELME, E. La lepre-est elle mentionnée dans la bible? *In La Lepre*. Jeanseime, E., ed. Paris, G. Doin, 1934, pp. 12-16.

⁵ MACARTHUR, W. Mediaeval "leprosy" in the British Isles. *Internat. J. Leprosy* **21** (1953) 218-230.

⁶ TAS, J. On the leprosy in the bible. Presented at the 7th Congress International d'Histoire des Sciences, Jerusalem 1953, pp. 583-587. *Reprinted in Carville Star* **14** (1955) 1-2 (No. 9).

branded by Lendrum^{7, 8} as a "major hazard for public health and a more serious barrier to sound medical care than any difficulty in diagnosis or treatment."

The Vth International Congress of Leprosy (Havana, 1948), refused the plea of thousands of patients carried by Perry Burgess, and recommended instead educational campaigns to make the word "leprosy" acceptable. What kind of world-wide permanent effort has been made since?

As director of the São Paulo Leprosy Department (Brazil) I could feel more closely the uselessness of some local and odd campaigns against universal words carrying all the weight of tales and superstitions, based on faulty translations of the Old Testament. Ninety per cent of our educators' work is to explain that leprosy is not "leprosy"; the remaining 10 per cent of their time, spent explaining resistance, the low grade of transmissibility, the new therapy, is destroyed the next morning by sensational front page headlines of "dangerous lepers threatening our peaceful city."

Changing words in the Bible and giving "Zaraat" its real translation will not be easy nor fast; anyway, it will not solve the problem of "leprosy" in the literature or in the dictionaries, like one within my hands which carries the definition: "leper—bearer of leprosy; sordid, repulsive, loathsome."

The only solution I see is that medical people agree on a new word, even if it has to be an artificial one, and immediately forget "leprosy" and its derivatives. The associations with the old name will wane in a few years if we try hard. The forthcoming IXth International Leprosy Congress will deserve the gratitude of doctors and patients alike if it revives the problem and offers a solution.

In the meantime, I could not wait and see "leprosy" spoiling all administrative action. As a provisional name I suggested "hanseniasis," with good receptivity at the XXIV Meeting of Brazilian Dermatologists (Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, October

1967), the Brazilian Leprological Association (Rio de Janeiro, November 1967), and the São Paulo Dermatological and Leprological Associations (December 1967). Professor Rabello, Chairman of the Committee of Nomenclature of the Brazilian Dermatological Society, informed me personally that in the next edition, the term "Hanseniasis" will be substituted for "Morbus Hansen."

Older substitutes like "Hansen's disease" and "hansenosis" were discussed and thought by some as more nearly correct, but "hanseniasis" was far more acceptable to most specialists and patients, and these are certainly entitled to have a voice in the question, after centuries of defamation.

Derivatives like "hanseniology," "hanseniologist," "hanseniotic," "hansenid," "hansoid," etc., were readily adopted. "Hansenioma" as a substitute for "leproma" would be unfair; "macules, nodules, infiltrations of Virchow" were alternative solutions. The forms of the disease will be known by the initials "V" (for Virchow), "I" (for indeterminate), "T" (for tuberculoid) and "D" (for dimorphous). "Mitsudin" is our antigen. I cannot do anything about *M. leprae* or the pathologic nomenclature, of course, but those simple administrative steps, unhesitatingly approved by Professor W. Leser, Secretary of Health of the State of São Paulo, have shown, in a few weeks, the first good results: (1) patients and families are thanking us; (2) our efforts to integrate with other public health activities are far more successful; (3) general practitioners, dermatologists and neurologists are finding it much easier to refer cases of "hanseniasis" to our new "Department of Sanitary Dermatology" (after the Venezuelan model) than to the old dreadful "leprosy prophylaxis."

I am now mailing letters and question forms to dermatologic and leprologic reviews and societies, and to professors, researchers and welfare workers in Brazil and abroad, including many members of the International Leprosy Association, in order to collect opinions and prepare a report in time for the forthcoming International Congress. I would appreciate it if you will

⁷ LENDRUM, F. C. The name "leprosy." American J. Trop. Med. & Hyg. 1 (1952) 999-1008.

⁸ LENDRUM, F. C. The tragic name of "leprosy." Modern Hospital 64 (1945) 79-80.

publish this letter to reach other persons and organizations.

I am aware of the difficulties of the problem and of the defects of our new terminology, and willing to accept any better suggestions. But I hope that I am not forced, by international disapproval or lack of cooperation, to fall back into the "le-

prous" nightmare and have to deal again with stigmas and superstitions.

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