Letter to the Editor: Wegener's Granulomatosis Eponym

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To the JAOCDD Editor,

Thank you very much for the latest illuminating issue of The Journal of the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology. While all of the articles were truly worthwhile, there is some controversy concerning the eponym in the title of one of the articles, "Herpes Zoster Ophthalmicus in a Patient with Wegener's Granulomatosis," in Volume 31, page 24. In 2008, there was a move to remove this eponym from this disease and refer to it in a more explicative form as "granulomatosis and polyarteritis."

In 1936, Dr. Friedrich Wegener described several cases of small vessel vasculitis with granulomatous inflammation.1 In 1954, Goldman and Churg described seven cases of their own and reviewed another 22 previously reported cases.2 Subsequently, the disease became known as Wegener's granulomatosis, and that eponym has remained a fixture of the entity.

In 1989, just prior to his death in 1990, Wegener was awarded the Master Clinician award by the American College of Chest Surgeons; however, in 2007, the American College of Chest Surgeons rescinded this award predicated on Wegener's known affiliation with the Nazi Party.1 Several authors specializing in diseases of the chest, rheumatology, and nephrology have stated that in view of that affiliation, the eponym should no longer be used.3,4,5

Separately, Woywodt and Matterson conducted an extensive six-year probe into the life of Dr. Wegener.5 They found that as early as 1933, he joined the Nazi Party, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and serving as the pathologist in Lodz in 1939. His office was adjacent to a Polish ghetto. They found no indication of criminal conduct on the part of Wegener, but they did uncover a letter concerning Wegener's reviewing an article on pulmonary air embolism. Air embolism was seen in septic abortions and was a notorious finding in Nazi altitude experiments done on prisoners.

While there is no evidence of war crimes or criminal activity, the record clearly reflects Dr. Friedrich Wegener's intimate association with and membership in the Nazi regime. As such, his character must come into question, and therefore it seems inappropriate to give him the honor of attaching his name to a disease entity. The Chest Society took the first step by removing its Master Clinician designation.

Generally speaking, we feel the practice of medicine would be well-served, and the teaching of medicine to our students enhanced, if we refrained from the use of eponyms completely and used only scientific, descriptive terminology for disease entities. While it might be awkward to refer to Starling's Law as "End Diastolic Filling and Stroke Volume," the descriptor, as opposed to the eponym, would not only be a far more understandable path but would also remove any potential for embarrassing ethical disclosures that might be associated with an investigator.

Yours truly,
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References

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