

Nazi past and changes in disease names: the Wegener's disease case

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To name a disease after a physician is a great sign of recognition of his/her work. There are plenty of examples of such a centuries-old practice. One of them is the Alzheimer's disease, which causes memory loss. Another is the Crohn's disease, a chronic intestinal inflammation named after the famous gastroenterologist Harold Crohn of the Mount Sinai Hospital in Nova York.

In 2001, I was one of the rheumatologists to report in the Brazilian Journal of Rheumatology the embarrassment caused in the medical literature by the name attributed to a type of arthritis known as Reiter's syndrome.¹ Hans Reiter was discovered to have been a follower of Hitler, the Nazi leader, and to have participated in human experiments at concentration camps. Several medical societies have suggested renaming "Reiter's syndrome" to "reactive arthritis".

An inflammation of the arteries and veins of the lungs, facial sinuses, and kidneys had been identified as a specific type of chronic granulomatous inflammation. In 1937, Friedrich Wegener, pathologist in Berlin, described that disease, which became known as "Wegener's granulomatosis",² an autoimmune disorder, in which antibodies attack their host.³

Despite the suspicion of his participation and collaboration with the Nazi Medicine, the allies released Wegener due to lack of evidence that he had taken part in Hitlerism. However, subsequent and more recent investigations, conducted by Eric Matteson, a rheumatologist at one of the most prestigious American medical centers, the Mayo Clinic, have shown that Wegener was a dedicated Nazi, who affiliated with the Nazi Party months before Hitler rose to power – differently from other physicians, who had to affiliate with Nazism to continue to practice Medicine. Wegener worked as a military pathologist

at Lodz, Poland, where the first Jewish ghetto was installed, with more than 250 thousand Jews. According to Dr. Matteson, Friedrich Wegener was a dedicated Nazi – it was impossible for him to not have known what was happening. Wegener died in 1990, at the age of 83 years, after having received several honors from the British Thoracic Society and the American Thoracic Society.⁴

Medical societies have begun a campaign to rename "Wegener's granulomatosis" to "ANCA-associated granulomatous vasculitis" (ANCA – anti-neutrophil cytoplasmic antibody test).⁴ The American Lung Association used to have a prize named after Wegener, for young pulmonologists, but has rescinded it. One year before his death (1989), Wegener was awarded a Master Clinician prize by the American College of Chest Physicians, which has also been rescinded. In my scientific production, I have some studies on that disease, and I also want their titles to be modified.^{5,6} Many progresses have occurred in the treatment of that disease, but it can have a fatal course when response to treatment fails. We hope that patients be diagnosed with "ANCA-associated vasculitis" instead of "Wegener's disease". Those who have the opportunity to read this text, help make it widely known, so that situations like that do not continue to happen, that is, to honor war criminals by attributing their names to important discoveries in Medicine. In a recently published article, the American College of Rheumatology, the European League Against Rheumatism and the American Society of Nephrology have proposed an alternative name for "Wegener's granulomatosis": "granulomatosis with polyangiitis".⁷

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