Dr Friedrich Wegener and the American College of Chest Physicians Award

To the Editor:

I was involved with Dr E. C. Rosenow III, then president of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP), in creating the honor of Master Clinician, which was bestowed on Dr Friedrich Wegener in Boston, Massachusetts, in October 1989. I believe it is understandable I would be concerned over the withdrawal of the honor on the basis of unfounded and egregious charges made against Wegener in various articles appearing in Lancet and Rheumatology (Oxford).

Only organizations or entities bestowing an honor have the proprietary right to revoke it. In that sense, the ACCP was within its prerogatives. However, I strongly contest the reasons for doing so. Because the use of the name Wegener granulomatosis evolved from repetitive use in the broad medical literature, it seems inappropriate for a few organizations to arrogate to themselves such powers of revisionism. Your organization may have the right to revoke an honor it bestowed, but it does not have the right to erase Wegener’s name from medical history.

Second, if the name Wegener granulomatosis is somehow eliminated from the medical lexicon, how will future generations of medical scientists access the vast and valuable literature already instantiated in that appellation? You might suggest footnotes or asterisks, but that would entail citing the name, a self-deeating process.

I am acutely aware of the sensitivity of the Jewish community over this issue. However, I do not believe that all Germans who joined the Nazi Party were criminals. Consider Nobel Prize-winner Günter Grass, composer Richard Strauss, conductor Herbert Von Karajan, and former German President Richard Weiszäcker. There were many mitigating reasons of which we who stand smugly on the sidelines of the controversy have no visceral understanding. You have even alluded in your editorial (September 2007) to such reasons that might have confronted the young Wegener as he tried to find his way in the post-World War I Weimar chaos.

Wegener was a prominent German athlete, being the 1933 Schleuderball Champion. (This is a weight-throwing event that might be compared with the hammer throw or shot put.) The Sturmabteilung was a strong sponsor of athletic teams and athletes such as Wegener. This could have served as a motivation for joining the organization; a minor point to be sure, but such mundane considerations could have been operative, and not ideology, per se.

It is facile to suggest, “Wegener should not have taken a commission in the army and should have declined or resigned from his appointment in Lodz.” Anyone who has served in the military, especially in time of war, will view these remarks with astonishment as being naive. Had Wegener done so we would not be discussing this issue because it would have been resolved by a gunshot long ago.

It is within possibility Wegener could have mitigated the condition of many under his influence or control in a way reminiscent of Oskar Schindler (also a Nazi Party member). Given the character I perceived in my friend, Wegener, this is certainly a possibility, although I have no proof of such. Similarly, we have no proof he engaged in nefarious activity.

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References


Response

To the Editor:

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Dr DeRemee’s criticism of the editorials that appeared in CHEST about the decision of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) to withdraw the honorific of “Master Clinician” bestowed on Dr Friedrich Wegener in 1989.2,3 Dr DeRemee acknowledges that this decision was within the purview of the ACCP Board of Regents; however, it is for historians to decide whether charges about Dr Wegener’s activities as a member of the National Socialist Party were “unfounded and egregious.” Erasing Wegener’s name from the medical lexicon is the prerogative of the medical community, just as the editors of international rheumatology journals agreed to expunge the term Reiter syndrome from their publications in 2003, replacing it with reactive arthritis to accurately describe this arthritic condition and to stop paying homage to Hans Reiter, who carried out human experiments in Nazi concentration camps.3 It is our understanding from a personal communication with Dr Stanley Cohen, president of the American College of Rheumatology (ACR), that the executive committees of the ACR and

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