Letters Re Dr. Friedrich Wegener

Editor’s Note: Because of space constraints, we are publishing four of the letters received. They contain interesting comments and reflect divergent points of view.

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Time Does Not Heal All Wounds

Medical Luminaries, National Socialism, and the American College of Chest Physicians

It was with great interest that we read Dr. Rosen’s recent article1 (September 2007) on the wartime activities of Dr. Friedrich Wegener. Dr. Rosen is to be praised for his delicate and articulate handling of a complex and difficult situation. We were, however, surprised, disappointed, and confused with the ultimate conclusions and actions—or lack thereof—by the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP). Our letter has two major points: (1) to describe why the ACCP Master Clinician Award should in fact be posthumously taken away; and (2) to enunciate why the eponymous use of the term Wegener granulomatosis should be terminated.

DR. WEGENER’S NAZI CAREER

Dr. Wegener’s voluntary enlistment and rapid rise to leadership in the Nazi storm troops (SA) is not synonymous with stating that he was merely a member of the Nazi party; it has significant implications, both ideological and practical. The fact that Dr. Wegener apparently joined the SA prior to Adolph Hitler’s official rise to power indicates that this was more than likely an ideologically motivated, personal choice rather than a “career move.” In addition, being a leader in the SA was not just a political statement; the SA was Hitler’s private, paramilitary, terrorist, militia organization that perpetrated numerous acts of violence throughout Europe, primarily targeting Jews and political opponents. One of the most horrific examples includes the now infamous Kristallnacht (night of broken glass) in 1938 in which >30,000 Jews were arrested and deported to concentration camps in a single night. The slogans of the SA included “terror must be broken by terror” and “all opposition must be stamped into the ground.”2 At that time, Dr. Wegener was a Lt. Colonel in this organization.3

THE ACCP MASTER CLINICIAN AWARD

The arguments used to not take away the award are somewhat specious; this decision should not have been controversial. Up until Dr. Rosen’s article in September 2007, the ACCP had made no mistakes regarding Dr. Wegener; the information was lacking, and no apologies are necessary. However, with the current information (gained at great personal effort by Dr. Woywodt1,2), the ACCP must withdraw the award. In this present era of terrorism—specifically with recent acts of terrorism being perpetrated by physicians in London—national medical societies must remain as far removed as possible from any potential acts of war or terror: past, present, or future. Dr. Rosen’s arguments for Dr. Wegener keeping his award make little sense. Whether or not he has been legally convicted of “war crimes” is irrelevant; his being a high-ranking officer in the brownshirts is more than reason enough to rescind his award. Finally, the statements regarding the date that the Master Clinician Award was presented (1989) and date of Dr. Wegener’s involvement in the Nazi party (from 1932 to 1945) as factors in determining whether or not the award should be retracted demean awards from national medical societies, the leadership of national medical societies, and specifically the ACCP.

WEGENER GRANULOMATOSES: WHAT MUST BE THE END OF AN ERA

Having a disease named after someone is a tremendous and rare honor in the field of medicine. If such a person is found to have taken part in criminal activities, physician leaders are honor bound to do all they can to rectify the mistake and remove the accolade.5 It is inappropriate and irrelevant to state that subsequent “good” actions and statements may absolve one from having been involved in such organized criminal activities. If this disease were known as Himmler’s granulomatosis, there would not be national debate as to the continued use of this eponym. The Vasculitis Foundation of North America has stated that “as physicians and family members, we would prefer a different name for our disease.”6 The ACCP and Dr. Rosen have been given an opportunity to bring historical accuracy to the memory of a man who participated in the evil Nazi regime, which visited death and destruction to so much of the world from 1933 to 1945. This opportunity cannot, should not, and must not be missed.

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Regardless of motive, Dr. Wegener chose to join organizations dedicated to the racial agenda that led to the industrialized genocide carried out by the Third Reich. He then chose silence.

Dr. Wegener’s Nazi party membership and storm trooper rank distinguishes him from drafted German citizens serving in the armed forces during World War II. During his 6-year tenure in Poland as an army and health office pathologist, Dr. Wegener’s office was three blocks from the Lodz ghetto. The ghetto included Jews from Lodz as well as Jews and Romany deported from the Reich. They were incarcerated, starved, and utilized as slave labor before their deportation to the Chełmno death camp. There they died in mobile gas vans, and their ashes were scattered in the woods. It is inconceivable that Dr. Wegener did not see nor know what awaited those human queues in Lodz, boarding the open trains to take them on their last journey.

After 1945, Dr. Wegener resumed his career at the first opportunity, continued his work, and avoided ever publicly commenting on what he had surely seen and knew of. We comprehend silence during the Nazi regime as there is no moral requirement for heroism. However, it would have been far less courageous and even morally required to speak out at some time and place after the war. There was still risk, however. The German medical establishment even to this day favors silence, encouraging “not soiling one’s own nest” (nestverschmutzen). Some in the medical community who spoke out were in various ways ostracized, punished, or driven from their chosen professional paths and not only in Germany. As Dr. Wegener attained international acclaim, his testimony may have helped the German medical establishment finally free itself of its shameful past of the National Socialist era. In addition, he could have provided additional eyewitness evidence to further refute the revisionists and holocaust deniers. But Dr. Wegener chose silence.

For this, he must be held morally responsible and thus ineligible for honors from the ACCP or other organizations expressing humanitarian ideals. We urge the ACCP to retract the Master Clinician Award from Friedrich Wegener. We also encourage the replacement of the disease eponym Wegener syndrome with that of ANCA-positive vasculitis in all publications of the ACCP. Not only do Dr. Wegener’s life choices more than justify this, but like so many eponyms it is either an inaccurate reflection of the contribution of the eponymee or an inapt expedient.

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Freidrich Wegener
The Past and Present

To the Editor:

Dr. Mark Rosen has elucidated the deliberations of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) in reviewing its decision in 1989 to bestow an award on Dr. Friedrich Wegener. The 1989 decision took place without the ACCP having the benefit of Dr. Wegener’s complete curriculum vitae. We applaud the frankness and good will of the ACCP in engaging in this discussion. While we understand the dangers of the “retrospectoscope,” we believe that the ACCP, in spite of its carefully considered judgment, should move to correct a misjudgment of the past and retract the award to Dr. Wegener. What has changed is not the values or mores of the ACCP, as strongly held in 1989 as today, but biographical facts are evident today that if known in 1989 would have disqualified Dr. Wegener as an ACCP awardee then, as they do now.

This discussion has been brought about by biographical information concerning Dr. Wegener’s professional life brought to light by one of the authors and conveyed to the ACCP by the other author. Dr. Rosen’s column details Dr. Wegener’s National Socialist Party (Nazi) membership, his ascension to rank of “physician Lt Colonel” in the storm troopers, and his professional services in Lodz, Poland. It is true that there is no currently available evidence of Dr. Wegener as a direct perpetrator in the heinous crimes of the National Socialist regime in the Warthegau or elsewhere in Nazi occupied Europe. Nevertheless we believe Dr. Wegener is morally accountable for choosing to join the Nazi organizations liable for expounding a philosophy of violence inevitably producing mass murder, and for remaining publicly silent about events until his death in 1990. By such silence, he chose to remain a bystander rather than bear witness to the genocidal crimes he observed in the Lodz ghetto. Bearing witness may have been all the Jewish and Romany people, incarcerated, brutally mistreated in the ghetto, and inexorably annihilated, could have hoped for.

Dr. Wegener’s motivation for joining the Nazi party and its storm troopers went to the grave with him. But to varying degrees, it may be attributed to the following: (1) careerism: Dr. Wegener’s supervisor and academic mentor Martin Staemmler was one of the major proponents of the regime; (2) family ties: his brother was a devoted party member who rose to the rank of “general” in the Schutzstaffel (SS) and Gauleiter; and (3) scientific appeal: the Nazi biological agenda had great allure for physicians, anthropologists, and biologists. This agenda, and careerism, attracted almost 50% of German physicians to join the Nazi party.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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