

Addison's disease: historical notes on the eponym

Abstract

Eponyms have long been known in Medicine as the names of practitioners which were given to illnesses. Addison's disease happens to be a favorite one. Therefore, its historical dimensions are worthy of notes.

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Historical texts

The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary¹ prides itself not only in explaining a word but also on assigning its year of first usage. Concerning eponym, this means "one for whom or which something is or is believed to be named" whereas the year was 1840. Turning to Addison from whom Addison's disease flowered, this means not only "a destructive disease marked by deficient adrenocortical secretion and characterized by extreme weakness, loss of weight, low blood pressure, gastrointestinal disturbances and brownish pigmentation of the skin and mucous membrane but also "about 1856" as the originating year.

Year of its origin turns out to vary in the literature. Thus, when I set out to publish on the falseness of such a year.² I exemplified with among many others the 1909 MD Thesis of Durham University. In it, Kemp³ proposed that Addison deserved it and it was the very title in that Thesis!

Likewise, in the 1959 monograph of Simpson et al.,⁴ they wrote that cancer deposits in the adrenal glands were "considered to be a rare cause of Addison's disease, an eponym which in their view was worthily suggested by Hunter in 1909." It is noteworthy, however, that not long after Addison's initial publication, Greenhow⁵ used that name in 1866. Thereafter, it was used in diverse journals in 1868,⁶ and in 1893⁷ as well as in books by such popular authors as Osler⁸ in 1885 and Byrom⁹ in 1899.

Gough¹⁰ drew attention to the historical aspects of eponyms in the field of Endocrinology. He included Addison's disease. As he put it, the syndrome was described by him in an address to the South London Medical Society in 1849, and was published in his treatise on Diseases of the Suprarenal Capsule in 1855.¹¹

Another historical view of him was pictured by Judith W¹² thus: "Richard Bright, Thomas Hodgkin, and Thomas Addison, giants of 19th century medicine were contemporaries at Guy's Hospital." In fact, she was answering positively the question posed in 2007 of whether Eponyms are here to stay in medicine! Incidentally, the negative answer came from Alexander & Matteson.¹³

Conclusion

Eponyms are practically in daily use in Medicine. However, changes tend to occur. For instance, it has been noticed that English language itself may become the problem. Thus, it has been argued that the name itself should stand and *not* its possessive form. Therefore, as Indian authors advocated,¹⁴ "Addison's crisis" should not become

"Addisonian crisis"! In this context, strictness should be stressed because, in their view, "Improved awareness of appropriate medical nomenclature is the joint responsibility of the authors, editors, reviewers, and publishers."

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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