Friedrich Wegener

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Friedrich Wegener was born in Varel, Northwestern Germany on 4th April 1907. His father was a surgeon. His mother was a Sweed. He was educated bilingually.1 Wegener began his medical studies in the year 1927 at Munich, completing the undergraduate studies in 1932 from Kiel University.1 He joined the department of pathology of Kiel University in the year 1933 as junior assistant. He was appointed full assistant in 1934. He worked with Jores who was an expert in vascular pathology.

**Wegener’s Granulomatosis**

In June 1934, Wegener had performed an autopsy on a 38 year old man. The patient had died of renal failure, following a long, undiagnosed illness. The main findings at autopsy were saddle nose deformity, inflammation of nasal mucosa, and destruction of nasal septum; larynx, pharynx, trachea, and middle ear were similarly affected.1 Histology had revealed granulomatous necrotizing inflammation and glomerulonephritis. Wegener encountered a second case while he was working at Breslau. The patient was a 36 year old woman. She had suffered from chronic rhinitis and renal failure, due to an undiagnosed disease. Her autopsy findings were similar to that of the first case. Wegener studied both the cases in detail and excluded an infectious cause. In 1936, he presented the findings at the German Pathological Society meeting held in Breslau. It generated much discussion. Many of his colleagues recollected similar cases. A full report of the cases was published in 1939. The condition came to be known as “Wegener’s granulomatosis”, an eponym which Wegner himself disliked. (According to him, the disease was waiting to be discovered and some one had to do it). Interestingly till the time Godman and Churg published an article in 1954, on “Wegener’s granulomatosis” Wegener had not grasped the importance of his work.

In 1939, (at the outbreak of World War II) Wegener joined army as a pathologist. In 1944, he suffered from Diphtheria. After recovering from the illness, which took almost a year, Wegener served as a field surgeon and ended up as an American prisoner of war. He was de-nazified in 1947, and allowed to practice medicine.1 In 1964 Wegener resumed academic career, when a medical university was established in Lubeck. He retired in 1970. Wegener was a dedicated teacher. He held autopsy seminars that were popular with students and the staff. On his retirement students had organized a torch procession. After retirement Wegener remained in obscurity until 1986 when he was “rediscovered”, because of the growing interest in vasculitis. He was actively involved in vasculitis meetings. He was also involved in the formation of patient support group. Wegener had participated in a symposium at the age of 83 and even published a paper (his last one). He was inducted by American College of Chest Physicians as a master clinician in the year 1989.

Wegener died in 1990 of a stroke. A Wegener award was planned in his honour in 1990s. However it was
abandoned because of his connection with Nazi regime and possible participation in War crimes. Further the eponym Wegener’s granulomatosis has been replaced with polyangiitis with granulomatosis.  

**Association with Nazi Regime**

Wegener was a member of brownshirts, (a paramilitary Nazi organization) and National Socialist Party. He held the rank of Lieutenant colonel equivalent in the army. For lack of documents the details of his involvement with Nazi regime are not clear, but possibly he had some association. Lodz, where he worked during the war was the first place to establish a closed ghetto for Jews. It was also a spearhead of genocide. German health authorities were implicated and Wegener had conducted a few autopsies. There is, however, no clear evidence of his actual participation in Nazi war crimes.

**References**