Carl Rokitansky, A Premier Pathologist

JV Pai-Dhungat*, Falguni Parikh**

Carl Von Rokitansky (1804-1878) was a premier pathologist, a recognised member of triad, with chief of medical clinic Josef Skoda and renowned dermatologist Ferdinand Von Hebra, responsible for revival of the great Neo-Vienna Medical Centre in 19th century.

Born in Koniggratz, Bohemia, he received his MD degree at the age of 24. He directly joined pathology laboratory, remaining there throughout his life. Rokitansky was largely self-taught, at the necropsy table. He was appointed as director of Pathology institute, advancing to full Professorship in 1844. With his efforts, Emperor Josef II decreed, that all who died in the general hospital, would be subject to postmortem examinations. With the enormous resources of Allegemeines Krakenhous at his disposal, Rokitansky did extensive pathological work and it is said that he had between 1500 and 1800 cadavers annually at his disposal. He was responsible for more than 60,000 autopsies, of which at least 33,000 were performed by him. No one before him and probably even later, had such a vast experience in autopsy room. It is a curious coincidence that his first autopsy was on a cirrhotic composer, none other than the legendary Ludwig Von Beethoven.

Rokitansky was appointed Dean of the medical faculty 1849, and Rector of the university, in 1850. He was genial and unassuming, a graceful and witty writer. He never practiced medicine, but exerted a profound influence on clinical medicine, with his accurate description of structural changes, pathogenesis and classification of disease. He was an outstanding teacher, attracting students from near and far, to the pathological amphitheater. Rokitansky was the first one to differentiate lobar from lobular pneumonia. He left a classic account of acute yellow atrophy of liver, giving the disease its present name. The description and development of emphysema, malignant changes in gastric ulcer, and acute dilatation of stomach are attributed to him. In orthopaedics he is memorable as the first one to describe the spondylolysthetic deformities.

Rokitansky’s greatest work was Handbuch der pathologischen Amnatomie, published in three volumes (1842-46). Unfortunately, he attempted to revive a modified form of humoral theory, by putting forward a doctrine, that chemical states of substances were actually susceptible to disease. This was at a time when the scientific world was formulating a new cell theory in biology. These views were smashed by young Virchow’s incisive attack. Virchow however admitted that his jolly Viennese rival was the ablest descriptive pathologist of his time. In the later edition, Rokitansky omitted his theory, after discussion with the newly established class of pathological chemistry. His finest production was his monograph on diseases of arteries, illustrated with 23 folio plates and his great memoir on congenital anomalies of heart, mainly septal defects and transposition of great vessels.

Rokitansky brought the clinicians to the autopsy table, so that they could learn about their triumphs and failures, in the diagnosis made at the bedside. A highly respected and jovial person, he died of asthma, in 1878.

*Professor (Retd), **Associate Professor, Dept. of Medicine, TN Medical College & BYL Nair Ch. Hospital, Mumbai 400 008