Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902)

JV Pai-Dhungat*

Rudolf Ludwig Karl Virchow is called the "Father of Modern Cellular Pathology". He obtained his medical degree at the University of Berlin in 1843. He was a man of strong convictions and even stronger social conscience.

A young but vigorous physician, he openly attacked Bismarck’s lawless "blood and iron" policies. Bismarck extremely irritated by this pugnacious little doctor, thought to silence him. An excellent swordsman, he challenged Virchow to a duel. Virchow’s only weapons were his surgical scalpel and his sharp, quick-witted tongue but because he wished to continue to use both for the benefit of his country, he declined the challenge. He denounced social conditions scathingly and consequently lost his University position. He took a stand that it was useless to try to treat sick people until one treated a sick society.

Virchow investigated the nature of phlebitis, which caused sudden unexpected death in many patients and described the phenomena of Thrombo-embolism. He realised the important role the microscope could play in the study of disease. This was brought sharply to his attention when he examined the blood of a seriously ill patient. A smear of patient’s blood under the microscope showed increase in the number of WBCs. High leucocyte count persisted till the patient’s death. Virchow had discovered leukaemia and published his paper on "Weisses Blut" at the age of 24. He showed that the microscopic examination of the blood of the sick should be a routine in medical diagnosis.

His great treatise, Die Cellularpathologie, explained his new principles. This permitted molecular biologists a century later to bring the study of disease down to still more fundamental level of molecules within the cell.

Virchow however refused to accept Pasteur’s germ theory of disease. He viewed disease as a civil war between cells and not an invasion from outside. Of course we now know that there are diseases of both varieties, Pasteur’s and Virchow’s. But he so vigorously rejected the idea advanced by bacteriologists including Koch, that the birth of the new science marked the finale of cellular pathology for the time.

The seemingly indestructible Virchow remained vigorous and healthy until his death on September 5, 1902 at the age of 81. We should salute this great man on his 100th death anniversary.