Moritz Kaposi – Resurgent Dermatologist

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Moritz Kaposi (1837-1902) was born to a Jewish family in Hungary, originally his surname was Cohen, but with his conversion to Catholic faith, he changed it to Kaposi in 1871, in reference to his town of birth. Kaposi studied at the University of Vienna, where he received his medical degree in 1861.

Kaposi married Hebra’s daughter Martha Hebra. Together with his mentor Ferdinand Von Hebra he authored the Textbook of Skin Diseases in 1878. He was appointed to Von Hebra’s clinic, and later obtained postgraduate qualification with a dissertation titled Dermatologie and Syphilis (1886). He was made professor at the University of Vienna in 1875 and became member of the board the Vienna General Hospital. Kaposi’s main work was Pathology and Therapy of the Skin Diseases in Lectures for Practical Physicians and Students, published in 1880. It became one of the most significant books in the history of dermatology being translated to several languages and was readily available in English. He became the Chairman of Vienna School of Dermatology after Hebra’s death in 1880, and received his professional mantle, as a leading dermatologist in Vienna.

Kaposi was a prolific writer, a highly respected teacher, and a wise clinician, capable of luring students and patients from many countries. A generation of dermatologists was trained by him, and his pupils occupied chairs of dermatology in a number of continental Universities. The initial description of several cutaneous diseases has been attributed to Kaposi. Included are Kaposi’s pigmented sarcoma of the skin (1872), diabetic dermatitis (1876), xeroderma pigmentosum (1882), lichen planus (1886) and many others.

The description of “idiopathic, multiple pigmented sarcoma” a rare cancer of the skin, in five elderly male patients, appeared in Archiv fur Dermatologie and Syphilis (1872). It says “It always begins upon both feet and hands, and advances by separate growths… until at the end of two to three years, it appears upon face and trunk …At the autopsy, similar nodules are found in large numbers… they are specially dense and apt to be necrotic…Histologically, we find a round cell sarcoma, except in few places, characteristic spindle cell sarcoma is seen…particularly presence of capillary haemorrhages”.

More than a century later, the appearance of this disease, in young gay men in San Francisco, New York and other coastal cities in USA, was one of the first indications that a new disease, now called AIDS, had appeared. Kaposi’s sarcoma is a tumour that is caused by a herpes virus (KSHV or Kaposi’s sarcoma associated with Herpes Virus) and is now a commonly reported cancer in parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

According to his biographer J D Oriel, “Moritz Kaposi in his lifetime was acknowledged as one of the great masters of Vienna School of Dermatology, a superb clinician, and a renowned teacher”, while his mentor Ferdinand Von Hebra is considered “father of dermatology”. Kaposi was one of the first to establish dermatology on its anatomical pathology basis. His name is resonating again in the recent years.

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