Christiaan Eijkman (1858-1930)

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Postal stamps issued on Eijkman by Grenada, Christiaan Eijkma - Discoverer of cause of Beri-beri

Christiaan Eijkman was born on Aug 11, 1858 at Nijkerk in Gelderland (The Netherlands), the seventh child of the Headmaster of a local school. Eijkman studied at Military Medical School of the University of Amsterdam where he was trained as a Medical officer for the Netherlands Indies Army. He served as Medical officer of Health in Java (Indonesia) from 1883-85. An attack of severe malaria impaired his health so much that he had to return to Europe on sick leave in November 1885. This proved to be a lucky event for Eijkman because he got an opportunity to come into contact with A.C. Pekelharing and C. Winkler in Robert Koch’s laboratory in Berlin. He was seconded as assistant to the Pekelharing-Winkler mission which was sent out by the Dutch Government to conduct investigations into Beriberi, a disease causing havoc in Dutch colonies in 1880s. He was hopeful to find the bacterium that caused beriberi and, hopefully, a cure. In 1887, Pekelharing and Winkler were recalled but Eijkman, on their recommendation was appointed the first director of commission’s laboratory in the Military Hospital Batavia (Jakarta). At the same time he was also made director of the Javanese Medical School. Thus ended Eijkman’s short military career and he now could devote himself entirely to science. He remained director of Medical Laboratory from Jan 15, 1888 to Mar 4, 1896 and he made number of important researches during this time. His greatest work was in the discovery of cause of Beriberi. He observed that the chickens fed with white polished cooked rice became sick with beriberi and recovered when fed with unpolished brown rice. He noted that the real cause of Beriberi was a deficiency of some vital substance in the staple diet of the natives, which is located in the so called ‘silver-skin’ (Paricarpium of the rice). This led to the concept of vitamins and paved the way for discovery of Thiamine or anti-beriberi factor by Casimir Funk in 1912. In 1929, Eijkman shared the Nobel prize in Physiology or Medicine with Frederick Hopkins for their role in discovery of anti-neuritic factor.

After his return to home in 1896, he was appointed Professor in Hygiene and Forensic Medicine at University of Utrecht in 1898. Eijkman turned to the study of Bacteriology at Utrecht and carried out his well known fermentation test. His unassuming personality was one of the reasons that his great merits were at first not really appreciated in his own country. He died in Utrecht after a protracted illness on Nov 5, 1930. The depicted ½ C stamp was brought out by Grenada in his honour.