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Hmmm, that name rings a bell: Reflections on eponyms.

The dictionary defines the word eponym as «the name of a disease, syndrome, anatomical part, surgical instrument, etc., derived from the name of the person who discovered, invented or first successfully promulgated it». As such, eponyms are generally ascribed to honour or credit the person who first described or popularized an important medical contribution. In the mid-19th century with the rapid advancement of knowledge in microbiology, chemistry, physiology and industrial technology, medicine became a branch of science. The practice of medicine also shifted from mystical thinking and a belief that bad bodily fluids or «humours» were linked to illness and moved toward a scientific approach that identified pathogens (bacteria, viruses, toxins) as sources of disease. In this milieu, doctors became acutely aware of the importance of recognizing a particular sign or a group of clinical signs that identified a disease, and eponyms flourished in this milieu, becoming common parlance in the medical vernacular.

Over time, certain eponyms have become current and standard terminology for a disorder, rather than use of its scientific name. For example, we know the disorder implied by the term «Parkinsonism» but how many of us would know it by the histopathologic term «degenerative synucleinopathy»?

Eponyms are medical shorthand. So much information is packed in the term «Susac syndrome» and we do not need to specify that is a syndrome of autoimmune endotheliopathy with multiple branch retinal artery occlusions, encephalopathy, and hearing loss. Eponyms can also serve as one means to remember medical history. There is an aspect of national pride when you know that a particular disease or cure had been identified by a someone in your country or even someone in your own lineage. Here are just a few of many notable Swiss who became eponyms.

Emil Theodor Kocher (1841–1917) was a professor of surgery at the University of Bern and laureate of the first Nobel Prize in Physiology/Medicine, awarded for his research on thyroid disease. The «Kocher sign» is the fast convulsive retraction of the eyelid during fixation in the setting of hyperthyroidism.

Wilhelm His Jr. (1863–1934) was a Swiss-born cardiologist who later became dean then rector at the University of Berlin. He identified the specialized tissue in the heart that transmits the electrical impulses and helps synchronize contraction, now known as the «bundle of His».

Willy Burgdorfer was an American-born, internationally acclaimed entomologist and bacteriologist in Basel. He isolated the bacterial pathogen that causes Lyme disease in 1982 and the spirochete has been named *Borrelia burgdorferi* in his honour.

In ophthalmology, there are 1257 eponyms from 36 countries (7.6% Swiss). Do you know the following eponyms from Swiss ophthalmologists? Amsler test, Haab reflex, Horner syndrome, Vogt striae, Landolt ring, Goldmann perimeter.

By the mid-20th century, new eponyms were markedly on the decline. Since the latter 20th century, eponyms have been criticized for their cultural and gender bias. This is true. At the time when eponyms flourished in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Europe was the dominant culture for medicine in the language of German, French or English. Women did



Otto Haab



Johann Friedrich Horner



Alfred Vogt



Hans Goldmann



Edmund Landolt



Marc Amsler

not go to medical school and thus eponyms from women are rare. Indeed, the popularity and continued use of eponyms in future generations will be modulated by social, political and cultural influences.

Disclaimer

I have no connection with the person who described Kawasaki disease. I have no connection with the Kawasaki motorbike industry.