

HANSENOLOGIA INTERNATIONALIS

(Hansen. Int.)

Hansen's Mycobacterium: Mycobacterium hansenii?**EDITORIAL.**

In an international inquiry (2) about a new terminology to replace "leprosy" and derivatives, 63.1% of the 195 respondents (out of the 286 addressed) agreed with the name *Mycobacterium hansenii* for the mycobacterium discovered by Hansen in 1873. To his "yes", the late Professor W. Feldman added a copy of a previous letter of his sent to the Journal of the American Medical Association (153:1041, 1953).

That letter was abstracted in the International Journal of Leprosy (22: 105, 1954) by Sister Hilary Ross, who, incidentally, also answered "yes" to the substitute names, the bacillus' included.

"Feldman, W.H. Hansenosis for leprosy. J. American Med. Assoc., 153: 1041, 1953.

The writer shares in the general objection to the use of eponyms in designating diseases, but he believes that a less opprobrious term than "leprosy" is desirable providing it has taxonomic acceptance. The microorganism of leprosy is correctly placed in the genus *Mycobacterium*. The objectionable feature is the name of the species, which is *leprae*. As a way around this difficulty, the name of the species might be changed to *hansenii*, in honor of its discoverer. The disease which it produces could then properly

be designated "Hansenosis", which the author believes would be correct in a taxonomic sense and would meet the objections of those who, for eponymic reasons, dislike the name of Hansen's disease." (Sr. Hilary Ross).

With that support and on the advice of Professor Otto G. Bier, the undersigned addressed a letter to the Judicial Commission of the International Committee on Systematic Bacteriology: "I would very much appreciate your opinion about the possibilities of a change in the bacteriological nomenclature, aiming especially at the substitution of the name of the species *leprae* and, if possible, at the introduction of a genus *Hansenia* or a species *hansenii*, so that some of the suggested substitutes for "leprosy" ("hanseniasis", "hansenosis", "hansenia") could stand on a taxonomies' basis."

The answer, although sympathetic, was negative: "I am writing to let you know that the Judicial Commission discussed informally but sympathetically the problem you raised about the changing of the name of the Leprosy bacillus, but came to the conclusion that a scientific name should not be changed except if it causes confusion; the Commission did not feel that such a case had been made out, and

whatever name it received would soon become associated with the disease in the minds of ordinary people" (Professor P.H.A. Sneath, Leicester, England; 10th January, 1974).

Consequently, no more attempts have been made since to alter the international name for the bacillus.

In the meantime, the term "leprosy" was officially banned in Brazil, in Portugal, in the United States Public Health Service, and in many services of Latin America and Cameroon. The time might be ripe, therefore, to reopen the question. The name *Mycobacterium leprae* hangs as a permanent threat to the solidity and efficacy of those terminological breakthroughs and as a heavy link with a past of obscurantism and opprobrium.

Feldman's substitute name *Mycobacterium hansenii* appears in two articles of this issue, but will not be used editorially unless a majority of our Scientific Commission and Editorial Board accepts it and justifies a proposition to the government of the State of S. Paulo, eventually to the government of Brazil.

Accordingly, this editorial is being addressed to all chairs of Bacteriology, Pathology, Dermatology, Neurology and Preventive Medicine in this country. Comments from any other reader of "Hansenologia Internationalis", in Brazil and abroad, will be warmly welcome and considered for publication.

If the results of this new inquiry lead to an official *Mycobacterium hansenii*, it will not be the first time that internationally approved names are relinquished in this country. For many years Brazil, at first with Argentina, then with all other Latin-American countries adhered to Rabello's "polar" classification "tuberculoid", "lepro-

matous" (now Virchowian in Brazil) and "indetermined" — while the rest of the world continued to use the terms "nodular", "neural", "cutaneous", etc. — up until the Havana Congress, 1948, made the Latin-American (later Pan-American) classification international. In the taxonomical field, *Paracoccidioides brasiliensis* was the name given to the agent of South American Blastomycosis (paracoccidioidomycosis) by Floriano de Almeida ; the new name was rapidly adopted by all Brazilian and foreign authors. *Paracoccidioides brasiliensis* is now the international substitute for the former *Blastomyces brasiliensis* and *Zymonema brasiliensis*.

Hopes that the Judicial Commission revises its policies are not being given up. True, there is no terminological confusion regarding *Myco. leprae*. But a much more serious and noxious confusion exists with the biblical "lepra", which, as is known, was only a degrading blemish on stones, garments and skins, and had no relationship whatsoever with any special disease of man. Chances that the biblical world would ever modify age old texts and correct what Gramberg (1) calls a "historical confusion of ideas", were always supposed to be negligible — until the New English Bible (1970) spontaneously made the changes eliminating "lepers" and "leprosy" of the Old Testament. Recent editions of the Catholic Bible have gone as far as expelling the "lepers" of the New Testament as well.

The cooperation of the Judicial Commission would certainly be most welcome, as it would accelerate the process of liberating a common human disease from a past of ignominy and infamy inextricably bound to the word "lepra", a word which has always caused much more suffering and distress than the disease itself.

Hansen's Mycobacterium

It is hoped that the results of this new inquiry authorize "Hansenologia Internationalis" to adopt Feldman's *Mycobacterium hansenii*. Otherwise, the evading term "Hansen's mycobac

terium" shall be used. *Mycobacterium leprae*, i.e., the mycobacterium of superstition and leprostigma, will never be used by its present editors.

A. ROTBERG

REFERENCES

1. GRAMBERG, K. P. C. A. "Leprosy" and the Bible. *The Bible Translator*, 11(1), Jan., 1960.
2. ROTBERG, A. "Hanseniasis", the new official name for leprosy in S. Paulo, Brazil. *Dem. Int.*, 8:40-43, 1969.