HANSEN'S DISEASE IN HISTORY

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Leprosy,or Hansen's disease, has tormented humanity throughout the times. The earliest accounts of a disease that many researchers believe is leprosy appears in China, around the fifth century B.C. and in as Egyptian papyrus written around 1550 B.C. In Europe, leprosy first appeared in the records of ancient Greece after the army of Alexander the Great came back from India and then in Rome in 62 B.C. coinciding with the return of Pompeii's troops from Asia Minor.

For centuries, leprosy has been both misunderstood and feared. For a long time leprosy was thought to be a hereditary disease, a curse, or a punishment from God. Leprosy patients were stigmatized and shunned. For example, in Europe during the Middle Ages, leprosy sufferers had to wear special clothing, ring bells to warn others that they were close, and even walk on a particular side of the road. Even in modern times, leprosy treatment has often occured in seperate hospitals and live-in colonies called leprosariums because of the stigma of the disease.

Dr. Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen of Norway was the first person to identify the germ that causes leprosy under a microscope. Hansen's discovery of Mycobacterium leprae proved that leprosy was caused by a germ, and was thus not hereditary. Also in Norway Daniel Cornelius Danielssen and Carl Wilhelm Boeck established leprosy as a clinical entity.

In 1921 U.S. Public Health Service established the Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana." It became a center of research and testing to find a cure for leprosy and a live-in treatment center for leprosy patients: Promin, a sulfone drug, and Dapsone were introduced there. In the seventies, the first successful multi-drug treatment (MDT) regimen for leprosy was developed through drug trials on the island of Malta. Today, WHO recommends it.