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EDITORIAL

Ophthalmic Pathology: The history of a growing profession

Ophthalmic Pathology, also known as eye or ocular pathology, is a highly specialized branch of the medical laboratory specialty. Clinical Ophthalmic Pathology involves gross and microscopic examination and diagnosis of eyes and ocular adnexal tissues that are removed surgically.

The history of the Ophthalmic Pathology goes back to the spring of 1945 in the United States. At the residents meeting of the Wilmer Institute at Johns Hopkins University, Drs. Theodore E. Sanders, John McLean and Benjamin Rones organized an Ophthalmic Pathology Club. These three visionaries drew up a list of about 20 potential members and invited them to an organizational meeting in October at the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology – later split into the American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Academy of Otolaryngology.

In 1947, a group of individuals interested in Ophthalmic Pathology started meeting annually in Washington, DC to study histologic sections from ocular specimens that had been obtained in different laboratories throughout the country and the group later became the “Verhoeff Society”. After its opening in 1955, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) became the regular site for the meetings. Initially microscopes were used by all participants of these meetings, but later became apparent that by sending out the case material to participants, prior to the meeting, the case presentations could be satisfactorily conducted without microscopes. Hence from 1985 the Society began to meet at different locations. At the 1998 meeting, the members voted unanimously to change the name of the Society to the “Verhoeff–Zimmerman Society” to honour Lorenz E. Zimmerman who had by far contributed more to the Society than anyone else.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Ophthalmic Pathology Society (as the Eastern Ophthalmic Pathology Club) held its first meeting on January 19–20, 1962. The organization’s birth was inspired by the success of the American Ophthalmic Pathology Club (later named the Verhoeff Society) few years earlier, on April

24th, 1959, when Norman Ashton wrote a letter to his friend Dr. Willem Manschot in Rotterdam in which he said:

“I have just returned from America and was most impressed by their Ophthalmic Pathology Club which has a restricted membership of 30 and meets once a year. It has no officers, no finances and no publications, the whole idea being that each member brings his most interesting case of the year to show to others. I thought that you and I might establish a similar European Eye Pathology Club ... Let me know your thoughts on this”.

The occasion to which he referred was when, during a period as Visiting Professor at Johns Hopkins Hospital, he was invited to be the Guest of Honour at a meeting of the Ophthalmic Pathology Club inaugurated by Dr. Verhoeff but only later dignified by his name. He also perceived that by having leaders of high caliber, standards were set which acted as a challenge to less experienced members.

The next step was to contact potential members. Apart from determining who might be invited to join the Club, there was, in view of the polyglot character of the prospective membership, a language problem which later on indicated that the proceedings should be conducted in English and that a degree of competence in English should be a condition of membership. This Society was acknowledged by Dr. Zimmerman in his editorial in the year 1962 (Zimmerman, 1962). He stated: “We take great pleasure in recognizing editorially this new European Society and we sincerely hope that it proves every bit as stimulating to European ophthalmic pathologists as the various American Clubs have been to their members”.

Dr. William C. Frayer was then elected as a permanent secretary in 1967 and was commissioned to draft a constitution and by-laws. Following the review and modification of his original document a constitution and by-laws were adopted at the Society’s seventh annual meeting in 1968. Following this, the two societies started to have joint meetings every 5 years alternating between the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

More recently, the International Society for Ophthalmic Pathology developed as a professional society formed for the advancement of Ophthalmic Pathology throughout the world. It supports methods of improving education and research in Ophthalmic Pathology in Medical Schools, Laboratories,



Hospitals and other Institutions. Since 1987, the Society has also held regular scientific meetings in conjunction with other organizations with common interests.

Several educational institutions offer 1- or 2-year fellowship in Ophthalmic Pathology. The fellows evaluate all specimens that are received in the laboratory and are expected to engage in new and ongoing research projects. Graduates of accredited programs in ophthalmology or pathology as well as pre-residency candidates are usually considered.

King Khaled Eye Specialist Hospital (KKESH) has an advanced Pathology and Laboratory Medicine Department, which is considered to be the most comprehensive source of tissue evaluation as well as a unique place for teaching and learning in the Middle East. The department offers 2-year fellowship program in Ophthalmic Pathology and it is also considered as an integral part of the King Saud University residency training program in Ophthalmology. Residents learn about ocular anatomy and disease by studying current laboratory cases as well as teaching cases in the files. This gives residents a clear understanding of what they see in the clinic when they evaluate eye diseases and disorders on a microscopic level. In addition, tissues and slides are submitted for consultation from other medical facilities in the surrounding region. However, there is no organization whatsoever in our area for developing discipline of Ophthalmic Pathology. KKESH being the leading eye care institution in the region is expected to take

the initiative to build up an Ophthalmic Pathology group. In order to be successful, the health workers in both the Ophthalmic and the Anatomic Pathology practice should realize, support and appreciate the importance of this profession. We also need to attract more graduates to join our fellowship program.

I am pleased to witness, in the current and previous issues of the Saudi Journal of Ophthalmology (SJO), several papers and cases reports which highlight the necessity of the Ophthalmic Pathology as an essential part of the ophthalmic knowledge and care.

Reference

- Zimmerman, L.E., 1962. The European ophthalmic pathology society. *Arch. Ophthalmol.* 68, 157–158.

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