
To the Editor:
What is an eponym? Why do we use it? Webster’s dictionary defines eponym as one for whom or which something is named. An eponym is the addition of a (person’s) name to the designation of an object, a phenomenon, a fact, etc., Halley’s comet, Paget’s disease, or Langerhans’ cells. In the English language this is done in the form of the Anglo-Saxon genitive, in other languages in grammatically corresponding ways.

Langhans [1], Langerhans [2], and Merkel [3] are honored by posterity in naming microscopic cellular bodies eponymously after their discoverers. (In Greek, ἐπωνομάζω means to name something after.) Interesting facts emerge upon studying the historical development of some eponyms. Moreover, the similarity of Langhans’ and Langerhans’ names and their personal interrelationship has created confusion over the decades, a fact that makes it particularly rewarding to comment.

Paul Langerhans (1847–1888) in 1868, still a student, described cells or “our dark bodies” stained by the gold chloride technique, which he considered part of a network of skin nerves. Shortly after, in 1872, Theodor Eimer (1843–1898) in Germany, and Enrico Sertoli (1842–1910) in Italy, wrote of Langerhans’sche Körperchen or corpuscoli di Langerhans, both designations literally meaning bodies in English. This, in fact, constitutes the first use of Langerhans’ name as an eponym [4,5]. The formula Langerhans’ cells was used by Friedrich Merkel in 1875 for the first time [6]. We have two firsts then, with regard to Langerhans’ name as an eponym, 1872, as Langerhans’ bodies, and 1875, as Langerhans’ cells. Langerhans’ islets in the pancreas, described in 1869 in his thesis, were proposed to be called such, in French, by Edouard Lagasse (1861–1927), in 1893/1894 [1].

Friedrich Sigmund Merkel (1845–1919) described touch cells in 1875 [7], following the papers by Georg Meissner (1824–1905) and Rudolph Wagner (1805–1864) two decades earlier (Meissner’s touch bodies). Robert Bonnet (1851–1921), at the School of Veterinary Medicine in Munich, for the first time used Merkel’s name eponymously relating to the cells described by him [8].

Theodor Langhans (1839–1915) all too often is mixed up with Paul Langerhans by inexperienced students. His paper on multinucleated giant cells in tuberculous granulation tissue appeared in 1868, i.e., in the same year, in the same Journal, as did Langerhans’ work on the dendritic cells in the epidermis. The eponym Langhans was proposed by Carl Weigert (1845–1904) in 1885, and hence the cells were spoken of as Langhans’ giant cells. Langhans’ second important description of a layer of cells in the decidua of the uterus was published in 1882 and linked to that author’s name eponymously as Langhans’ layer some time later [2].

For the sake of completeness it shall be mentioned that Carl Touton (1858–1934) described the xanthelasmic giant cell, as he chose to call it, in 1885. The eponymic use of Touton’s name has become commonplace over the last century. Again, no individual author is known who proposed the eponym.

Foreign body giant cells were named by Emil Marchand (born 1857), in 1883, referring to a thesis by Bernhard Heidenhain (born 1851), Breslau 1872. The latter type giant cells do not carry an eponym [9].

Eponyms can be very helpful as much as confusing to the student and researcher. They may facilitate learning and perpetuate the memory of original researchers, sometimes unjustifiably so because they were awarded incorrectly.

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REFERENCES