The first chairs and professors of dermatology, particularly of ‘German’ dermatology

Abstract A short outline is given of the establishment of the first chairs in dermatology/venerology in Central Europe, starting with the award of the Fothergillian Gold Medal to Robert Willan in 1790 and ending past mid-century with the establishment of the professorial chairs in Munich in 1863 and of Military Dermatology at the Vienna Surgical Academy in 1870.

Key words Venerology • Dermatology • Skin diseases

Historical development

Often the question is posed, ‘who was the first professor of dermatology?’ A simple question, one would think, but one that leads to a series of answers. ‘Dermatology’, ‘first’, and ‘professor’ must be evaluated separately, and several other points have to be the subject of our scrutiny. When did dermatology officially become dermatology instead of merely ‘skin diseases’? What is a ‘chair’? Who is a ‘professor’, a ‘lecturer’, a ‘dermatologist’? Who was involved? Where and when did it happen?

Skin diseases did not constitute a speciality discipline before the nineteenth century. The area was referred to as ‘diseases of the skin’, or ‘diseases incident to the skin’, e.g. in Turner’s treatise of 1736 [1], or as ‘morbi cutanei’. In the second half of the eighteenth century ‘dermologie’ may be traced in medical dictionaries; and also by 1777 ‘dermatologia’ [2, 3]. These terms referred to all inner and outer surfaces of the body, skin, intestine, etc. H. S. Jackson proposed ‘dermato-pathologia’ as a designation for the field of skin diseases in 1792 [4], but this term was not generally accepted. Altogether, it took almost a century till the term ‘dermatology’ was accepted by the medical world and the public and was used in official appointments [5]. Synonyms such as ‘dermologie’, ‘dermographia’, ‘derm(at)iatria’, ‘dermatophilie’ fell into disuse.

The first to receive a scientific award for work on diseases of the skin was Robert Willan (1757–1812) on 8 March 1790 (The Fothergillian Gold Medal of the Medical Society of London; preserved to this day by that society) [6]. Because of his prize-winning essay and his special interest and practise in treating skin diseases, Willan may be called the first dermatologist, in spite of the non-existence of this designation at the time. The first to head a school of dermatology was Jean-Louis Alibert (1768–1837) in the Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris after 1801. He eventually became professor of botanique, not of skin diseases (9 April 1821 [7]). The first to hold an appointment at a university obliging him to teach on skin and mental diseases was Vincenzo Chiarugi (1759–1820), at the University of Pisa, in Florence. His appointment in 1802 was as an honorary lecturer. Only in 1810 did he become a full professor, having climbed through all the echelons of academia [8]. Upon Chiarugi’s death the professorship ceased to exist. Next was Ferdinand Hebra’s appointment at Vienna University on 18 December 1849 as professor extraordinarius of Hautkrankheiten (diseases of the skin) only. In the same year, on 4 March 1849, Carl Ludwig Sigmund (1810–1883) was appointed professor extraordinarius of syphilis, also at Vienna University.

Thus, appointments made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries refer to ‘skin diseases’ and ‘syphilis’. This was soon to change.

Professors and lectureres (Dozents) were always appointed by governmental authorities based on their experience and merits as candidates in a certain academic field. Today, both types of appointment require defined academic and scientific qualifications.

A point considered unique to the academic systems in Austria and Germany and some other countries is the differentiation into professors ordinarii and extraordinarii. This distinction is not readily understood elsewhere and is difficult to explain, particularly so because the legal regulations in the various jurisdictions, e.g. Austria, Germany and Italy, were similar but not identical. (In Austria, for instance, there were as many as four types of professor ordinarius – a truly baroque spectrum!). It is necessary to em-
phasize, that the positions of professors ordinarius and extraordi
narius in nineteenth century parlance, are not equiva
tent to ‘full professor’ and ‘associate professor’, or ‘pro
fesseur’ and ‘professeur agrégé’, in Anglo-Saxon or French parlance of today. A professor extraordinarius was a fully independent head of department in his own right, but he could not become dean or rector magnificus; his voting rights in the professorial assembly were restricted. The highest rung of the ladder was a professor ordinarius, appointed ad personam or for a ‘systematized’ chair in the field.

Hebra and Sigmund reached this position in 1869 (29 September), and Moriz Kaposi (1837–1902) and Isidor Neumann (1832–1906), their successors, became professors ordinarii ad personam in 1894. The chairs were systematized for professors ordinarii in 1903 (department I, skin and venereal diseases; department II, venereal and skin diseases). Albert Reder Schellman (1826–1904) became professor ordinarius at the Military Medical School in Vienna (Josephinum) in 1870 (see below) [5].

What is a chair? Cattedra in Italian, καθηδρία in Greek, it originally meant a chair with arms; metaphorically, it stands for an independent teaching assignment at a university. Normally a chair is occupied by a professor, but not necessarily. Vincenzo Chiarugi, for instance, first became an honorary lecturer in 1802 and only in later years a professor. Nevertheless, Manelli [9] referred to his assignment as a cattedra right from the outset. Therefore, a chair could be a professorial chair or a lecturer’s chair (or Dozent's in German parlance). For this reason, comparison of cattedrae remains problematic if the qualifications of the leading personalities are not specified. On the other hand, if a professor heads the school but his appointment is described as professeur de botanique, as has happened in Saint-Louis in Paris, he cannot formally be considered professor of dermatology.

How does the establishment of chairs in Florence and Vienna compare to universities in Austria and Germany? To answer this question we have to turn to Munich [10], Berlin [11], Breslau [12] and Würzburg [13], because these cities closely reflected the developments in Vienna. Prague must also be mentioned, because Charles University was, until 1945, the oldest German language university. During the nineteenth century Prague ranked second only to Vienna in dermatology, as evident from its role in the foundation of this journal in 1869, and shortly after, in 1888/1889, in the foundation of the Deutsche Dermatologische Gesellschaft [14].

The establishment of chairs in dermatology/venereology after the foundation of the chairs at Vienna University in 1849 was as follows: Munich in 1839/1863, Vienna at the Military Medical School in 1864, Breslau and Würzburg in 1872, and Prague, Graz and Innsbruck in 1873. Vienna and Munich were therefore the first indisputably (1849, 1863 and 1864). Munich had the first professor ordinarius (19 March 1863) [15]. Shortly after, in 1869, Joseph Lindwurm (1824–1874), professor ordinarius in Munich, also became professor of medicine; dermatology was not considered important enough to have a chair of its own and there was no successor to him in this capacity. Lindwurm did what Chiarugi in Florence had done earlier in the century – he left dermatology for a bigger field.

The establishment of a chair did not always parallel the opening of a new university department. At times, the newly appointed professors had to wait and run the existing skin or syphilis wards. The discontinuation of a chair, for example in Florence and Munich, thwarted the development of a local school in the field. For this reason, and in contrast to Florence, Munich and Würzburg, the Vienna School prevailed and grew into the pre-eminent one on the continent of Europe.

What terms were used by the medical institutions, universities or the respective authorities in official appointments at the time? As mentioned above, ‘dermatopathologia’, coined by Henry Seguin Jackson in 1792, was not accepted as a name for the field. By an irony of history, the first appointment of a skin specialist described in terms other than Hautkrankheiten (diseases of the skin) was that of Albert Reder-Schellmann in ‘Dermatopathologie’, at the Vienna Military Medical School (Josephinum) in 1860 [16]. He was subsequently appointed professor extraordinarius in 1864 for Syphilidologie und Dermatologie, and professor ordinarius for the same on 5 April 1870 [17]. Joseph Lindwurm’s appointment in Munich was also described as für Dermatologie und Syphilologie [sic] [18]. He was appointed professor extraordinarius on 12 March 1859 and professor ordinarius on 19 March 1863. Both appointments of Reder-Schellmann as professor and of Lindwurm only as professor ordinarius for the first time made use of the newly adopted generic terms for the clinical speciality of venereal and skin diseases, i.e. ‘dermatology’ and ‘syphilology’.

The question(s) raised at the beginning of this paper can now be answered as follows:

1. The clinical speciality of skin and venereal diseases began to be regarded as such around the turn of the eighteenth century. New names for the speciality were proposed, but not universally accepted, before the mid-nineteenth century.
2. The first to receive a scientific award in the field, i.e. the first who may justifiably be regarded a ‘dermatologist’, was Robert Willan in 1790.
3. The first to hold an academic appointment (chair) for skin and mental diseases, was Vincenzo Chiarugi, in Florence (honorary lecturer 1802, full professor 1810).
4. The first to head a school and hold the rank of professor, if only for botanique, was Jean-Louis Alibert (head 1801, professor 1821). The first to head a school and hold professorial rank just for skin diseases (or syphilis), were Ferdinand Hebra and Carl Ludwig Sigmund, in Vienna (both 1849).
5. The first whose appointment, as Dozent, was not described merely as ‘skin diseases’ or ‘syphilis’ was Albert Reder-Schellmann in 1860 (dermatopathologie); Joseph Lindwurm’s appointments as professor extraordinarius the year before, and as Dozent in 1853, did not specify a field.