Nikolai Nikolaievitch Anitchkov (1885-1964)

The importance of cholesterol in atherogenesis is universally known today, and the role of its dietary intake in the origin of ischemic heart disease is extensively and passionately discussed among scientists and laymen alike. Yet, only few contemporaries took notice of the death on December 7, 1964, of the man who had “launched a thousand books” by his discovery in 1912 that cholesterol-feeding produces in rabbits vascular lesions closely akin to human atherosclerosis.

N. N. Anitchkov graduated from the Russian Military Medical Academy in St. Petersburg in 1909 and remained connected with that famous institution for many years. His doctor’s thesis dealt with “inflammatory changes of the myocardium”, and for the rest of his life his work was focused on the pathology, patho-physiology and biochemistry of the cardiovascular system. Following his epoch-making publication (1913) on the experimental cholesterol atherosclerosis (together with S. S. Khalatov), he studied two years in Germany under Aschoff where he developed his infiltration theory of atherogenesis.

From 1920 on, he served as director of the Departments of Pathological Physiology at the Military Medical Academy and of Pathological Anatomy at the Institute of Experimental Medicine of the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences, and from 1946 to 1953 he was President of the latter. In these capacities, Anitchkov trained a large number of scientists and he can be considered as the founder of the highly respected Russian school of pathologists.

Anitchkov’s magnum opus on vascular pathology (1940) included a classification of arterial diseases, differentiation of atherosclerotic changes from physiological vascular ageing, the phasic progression of atherosclerosis, mechanical and metabolic factors contributing to its development and regression, and the influence of coronary atherosclerosis on myocardial structure. Other aspects of his investigations concerned the reticulo-endo-thelial system, spontaneous and experimental autoinfection in animals, and the role of such infections in the pathology of the bile ducts and liver tissue.

The medical world owes N. N. Anitchkov one of its greatest advances in the understanding of vascular pathology. The undersigned is particularly indebted to him for personal encouragement in his early epidemiological approach (1932) to the problem of dietary cholesterol and fat in human atherogenesis, which resulted 1939 in now generally accepted warnings against an excessive consumption of cholesterol and animal fats. The far-flung epi-demiologic studies of Ancel Keys and co-workers after the Second World War, the brilliant work of Stare, Kinsell, Grande and others on the importance of saturated and unsaturated fats, the preventive initiative of Stamler and Rinzler, and the large-scale National Diet Study are all outgrowths of Anitchkov’s fundamental discovery more than a half century ago.

Aside of his outstanding scientific abilities, N. N. Anitchkov had the refined characteristics of a cultured gentleman of the old Russian era. Although gravely ill, he remained on his post at the
Institute of Experimental Medicine in Leningrad until the last days of his life, and no-one who ever had the privilege of meeting the dignified but friendly old man with the typical Russian white cap of the laboratory director will forget his charming and warm personality. W. Raab (Burlington, Vermont)