History of Allergy
Chemical Immunology and Allergy
Vol. 100

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History of Allergy

Volume Editors

Karl-Christian Bergmann  Berlin
Johannes Ring  Munich

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Editors

K.-C. Bergmann
Berlin
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J. Ring
Munich
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Authors

R.C. Aalberse
Amsterdam
p. 243

F. Alessandrini
Munich
p. 268

A. Alikhan
Rochester, Minn.
p. 97

L. Annunziato
Naples
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L. Caraballo
Cartagena (Colombia)

M. Cataldi
Naples

M.K. Church
Berlin

A. de Weck†
Fribourg

A.M. Edwards
Newport

E. Fernández-Caldas
Madrid/Tampa, Fla.

A.W. Frankland
London

O.L. Frick
San Francisco, Calif.

M. Gassner
Zurich

A. Genovese
Naples

F. Granata
Naples

M. Grosber
Munich

Contributors
Allergies are not new diseases; they have been around for probably 1,000 years or more. However, they have increased in prevalence in a dramatic way over recent decades, leading them to be called by some ‘the epidemics of the 21st century’. The questions of how they looked in clinical manifestations, what they were called and how they were treated becomes more and more difficult to answer the farther back in history we go. This is a common challenge in the history of medicine; yet there is an unusual dimension in the case of allergic diseases because they have only been understood in their pathophysiological entity since the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, terminology may be more difficult in this field than in other disciplines of medicine.

The number of sufferers and the number of allergies is rising all over the world. Additionally, the field of allergology, although relatively young in comparison to others, such as surgery or internal medicine, is growing rapidly. It unites thousands of doctors at world congresses, who devote themselves to the recognition and treatment of allergic illnesses.

It follows a good tradition when a publisher selects a special topic for the 100th volume of a series. Therefore, what could be more appropriate than this book, History of Allergy, for the 100th volume of the proud series ‘Chemical Immunology and Allergy’?

There are different ways to approach the history of a medical discipline. The purely historical approach deals with the facts, the characters, the lives of ‘heroes’, the great discoveries and the famous patients. The philosophic approach digs deep into the understanding of diseases and symptoms at different times in the past, often connected with general philosophical attitudes and sometimes also religious beliefs. In this context, terminology also becomes very important since it illustrates the philosophical attitudes of certain times and of great thinkers. At the center of the natural-scientific approach are the great discoveries and progress made in the understanding of natural phenomena, be they physiologic or pathologic in nature. It is in essence the pathophysiological approach trying to find causes for and mechanisms of diseases – progress which only occurred in the field of allergy in the 20th century (with limited exceptions in the 19th century). Finally, the clinical-medical approach refers to the description of symptoms, the hard work of classification, and the art of diagnosis and therapy.

This book represents a mixture of all these approaches. The editors did not want to limit the dialogue to merely the famous stories of great researchers and physicians in this field, and some of their great discoveries. The further we go back in time, the more important the historical approach becomes, in which we have to rely totally upon old scriptures. The philosophical approach is also important in order to understand the thinking of our ancestors. The more recent the period in history we are covering, the more natural science oriented and medical-clinical the text will be. Historical reflection is also given to recent decades, such as in review articles focused on the state of the art in a certain field.
In such a multi-authored book that deals with facts and events and lives that passed many years or centuries ago, it is natural that there are discrepancies with regard to certain events – personal recollections may differ from historical reality even in the life of a Nobel laureate. Great discoveries will also be remembered differently by different researchers, considering that they might be made in different parts of the world using quite different approaches and methods.

The editors gave the authors absolute freedom in the way they wanted to approach the subject. They did not interfere – as they maybe would have done in a textbook of clinical medicine – when they found discrepancies between different chapters. It is left to the reader to decide and form his or her own opinion on the events of the past.

There have been several treatises and essays about the history of allergology, why then one more? The reason for this is that we, the authors and the publisher, were inspired by the task ‘not only to protect the cinder but to fan the glow’, as was so appropriately expressed by Benjamin Franklin, following the belief of St. Thomas More (1477/78–1535) that ‘tradition is not the Holds of the cinder, but transmitting the flame’. With this book we weave together hope not only to transmit the flame of enthusiasm for allergology, but also to fan the glow. We all have a passion for the field of allergology, we treat our patients with real enthusiasm, and we look with admiration and pride at the achievements of our medical predecessors, the early allergists. In ancient times they diagnosed and treated based on sense and feeling, and certainly sometimes on need. Even in the Middle Ages, cause and effect was recognized in isolated cases. Since then, new diagnostic and therapeutic methods have been developed with ever greater frequency and rapidity up to present, modern times. In this book we intend to show this development of allergologic science over time, and to remind of its successes as well as its failures.

This is not a pantheon of allergology with biographic representation of all essential allergists and scientists, but we have asked the still living ‘pioneers’ in the field to participate in a personal reflection. Our special thanks and recognition go to them. The editors are aware that there are many additional dignified personalities worthy of inclusion in the ‘pioneers of allergy’ section! One criterion was that they should be retired from ordinary daily work in their profession in order to express their view with a certain distance to past events. Unfortunately, one of the pioneers recently passed away before the book was finished: Alain de Weck sent us his reflections as always with his typical precise descriptions and a sharp sense of humor. He also fostered the history of our specialty by producing the marvelous book, Ancestors of Allergy, edited by E. Simons, as well as the movie on the history and many facets of allergy presented at the World Allergy Congress (then International Congress of Allergology and Clinical Immunology; IAACI) in Stockholm in 1994 [see www.karger.com/chial100_movie2 and this vol., pp. 411–412].

In Germany, no one did more to promote the history of allergy than Hans Schadewaldt (1923–2009), to whom the editors are greatly thankful. His book Geschichte der Allergie in 4 volumes is an infinite treasure box.

This book is dedicated to all allergists all over the world, and to their patients. Together, they form the basis for this work. There can be no history without researchers and their pioneering inventions, nor without patients, who have served to understand this illness together with their doctors, enabling case reports and participating in studies to determine the effects of new drugs. To all of you, and for all your help with this book, we thank you.

The editors want to thank several individuals, without whom this work would not have been finished. First of all we want to mention Thomas Karger the publisher, who generously supported this project from the beginning. In the publishing house – without the enthusiasm and help of Thomas Nold, Miriam Schulz and Ruedi Jappert – we could not have handled such a large volume of manuscripts of so different character. We also want to thank Dr. Antonia Todorova and Dr. Tanja Müller for their help in providing literature, references and permission to reprint figures.

Two personalities in particular have influenced, motivated and helped both of us over the past decades in the strive to look back on our history in or-
der to better understand what is going on right now, and what will possibly occur in the future. They are Prof. Dr. Dr. Hans Schadewaldt (Düsseldorf), as a historian dedicated to allergy, and Prof. Dr. Alain de Weck (Bern), as the number one allergist and such a formative character over so many decades!

Finally, we ask our readers for constructive criticism if mistakes should have crept into the book. All authors and the publishing company have tried to appreciate the international rules of copyright. We would therefore like to apologize if any errors have been made.

With this book we hope to encourage not only allergists and allergic patients to reflect upon these diseases, but also young scientists and physicians to become enthusiastic for this exciting field, with its interdisciplinary character and its interface between genetics and the environment. May this book help to increase the understanding of so many cumbersome diseases and, thereby, be helpful to millions of patients suffering from allergies!

Karl-Christian Bergmann, Berlin
Johannes Ring, Munich