PIONEERS IN THYROID

Hakaru Hashimoto
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The Man Behind Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis

Hakaru Hashimoto is the name behind the disease known to all of us as Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis.1 However, it is not well known that it was at the relatively young age of 31 years, that Hashimoto described the hitherto unknown disease in Archiv Fur Klinische Chirurgie, the German journal of clinical surgery. The description, titled “Notes of lymphomatous in the thyroid gland (Struma Lymphomatosa)”, was about 30 pages long, and had five figures. Hashimoto chose to study an odd goitre- that was different from other types of thyroid swellings usually noted. He described the disease, used thyroidectomy specimens to further his findings- and even followed up the patients to study the clinical condition. His descriptions of the lymphomatous thyroid swellings probably laid the foundations of the distinction of this autoimmune thyroid disease, from the hard goitre that resulted due to Riedl’s Thyroiditis. Today, Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis, or autoimmune thyroid disease, is among the commonest thyroid diseases worldwide.2-4

A Brief History of Hakaru Hashimoto

In 1881, Hakaru Hashimoto was born in Midau, a small village of Japan, as the third son in a generation of physicians.

Hashimoto was said to be influenced by his grandfather, who had studied Dutch medicine. The classical monograph of Struma Lymphomatosa brought him to the notice of the international community, and he moved to Germany, to study at the Goettingen University. However, with the onset of the First World War, Hashimoto was forced to return to Japan. Returning to his home, he began his family practice, and soon had a large number of patients.

Tragically, Hashimoto, was infected with typhoid fever during one of his house calls- and he succumbed to it. He was 39 years old when he died.

A Life Worth Remembering

Several aspects of Hashimoto’s life make it unusual, and remarkable. He peaked when he was young, and his glittering intellect led him to make a landmark description of autoimmune thyroiditis- which would make him famous for ever. However, after the window period in his life where the magnificent discovery was made, Hakaru Hashimoto returned to family practice. By all accounts, he lived a general practitioner’s life, even making house-calls. Whether this was a decision based on choice or necessity – is not clear. However, the true story of a clinician researcher pursuing a highly specialized field, returning home to family practice after completing his scientific discovery evokes fascination. For, it is not just that he returned to his physical home in Japan- he also returned to his initial training as a doctor, and by all accounts, found peace and contentment in a family physician’s life.

There is another reason to remember his life. And that is his death, reportedly due to typhoid fever. How many brilliant...
and wonderful people would have lost their lives to such infectious diseases in the bygone era? We would never know. Today, typhoid fever, like several other infections, can be prevented, diagnosed and treated. As doctors, we would continue to be thankful and proud of medical discoveries that have enriched and enhanced lives worldwide.

References