“Sir Almost Right”: The Prodigious but Colorful Career of Sir Almroth Wright (1861-1947)

Authors

B. J. Freij1, J. B. Freij2; 1Beaumont Children's Hosp., ROYAL OAK, MI, 2Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Sch. of Publ. Hlth., Baltimore, MD

Disclosures

B.J. Freij: None. J.B. Freij: None.

Abstract

Almroth Wright (AR), “brought up in scholastic surroundings and comparative poverty”, graduated at 22 years with degrees in literature and medicine. AR eschewed clinical practice for medical science. Early research was on coagulation, citration of blood, and diabetes. In 1892, he became Chair of Pathology at the Army Medical School, Netley. He developed an agglutination test for Malta fever. From the bacteriologist Haffkine AR learned of live/killed bacteria use as vaccines. He made a Malta fever killed vaccine, injected himself, and was then inoculated with a live culture. It failed and AR suffered from Malta fever for weeks. AR focused on typhoid fever, a major killer of British soldiers. He injected himself and “surgeons-on-probation” with killed typhoid bacilli and showed that blood’s killing power against live bacteria increased 50-fold. The Boer War allowed for a limited field study in volunteers. AR pushed for vaccinating all soldiers. A heated debate arose with Karl Pearson in the BMJ pages. Pearson wanted a controlled trial, but AR was unwilling to wait. The War Office was pondering vaccinating all soldiers, before definitive proof of efficacy. AR was young and not well known. He was knighted to shore up his standing to push for the vaccine! AR moved to St. Mary’s Hospital in 1902 where he worked on opsonization and the “opsonic index”, paving the way for use of therapeutic vaccines; this failed. Because of lack of funds, AR financed vaccine production by collaborating with Parke Davis for 40 years. He raised the ire of medical practitioners with attacks on Harley Street and views on the “bankruptcy of medicine”. Critics dubbed him “Sir Almost Right”. Later research included saline treatment of wounds and pneumococcal vaccination of miners. AR was a fierce critic of the suffragette movement. He believed in “an illimitable gulf between men and women” and that diacritical judgment was “notoriously lacking in women”. An anti-suffragette letter in the The Times (March 28, 1912) espoused views such as “the mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiologic emergencies” and “there is mixed up with the woman’s movement much mental disorder”. The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage followed, a book justifying his opinions. By the time of his death, AR had published about 150 books and papers.