The Disease Concept of Chronic Pancreatitis, Past, Present and Future

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To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Japanese Society of Internal Medicine (JSIM), I would like to give a brief summary of the history of the pancreas and chronic pancreatitis, and in particular the disease concept.

The pancreas (Greek: pan-all; kreas-flesh or meat) was said to have been described first by Herophilus of Chalkidon in about 300 B.C. The organ was named in 100 A.D. by Rufus of Ephesus, a famous surgeon of ancient days, well known to Chaucer’s Doctor of Physic. The Greeks recognized that the pancreas was a distinct organ but they had no concept of its function. Galen gave a fragmentary description of the organ, a mechanical cushion for the stomach in the second century A.D. Whether Hippocrates regarded the organ as the site of any disease is questionable (1, 2).

In Japan, Dr. Genshin Udagawa invented the character 脇 (sui) to represent the pancreas corresponding to the Greek pan-kreas (all-flesh) in 1805 (3). Diseases of the pancreas were apparently unrecognized in antiquity. Friedreich is said to have confirmed the role of alcohol as a cause of pancreatitis in 1878 (1, 2).

In 1902, the year of the foundation of JSIM, Bayliss and Starling discovered secretin, the first hormone to be isolated, indicated not only that a hormonal mechanism existed for stimulating pancreas secretion, but that one part of the alimentary tract might in this way affect another (1).

Wholgemuth in 1908 reported the method of amylase determination. He was one of the first to develop a method for the quantitative estimation of disease in the blood (Enzyme diagnosis) (2).

In 1946, Comfort et al described chronic pancreatitis as a chronic relapsing disease, recognized its association with alcohol abuse, pointed out its relative frequency in the third and fourth decades of life, and noted its complications (4).

Hereditary pancreatitis was first described in 1952 by Comfort and Steinberg (5), another interesting milepost in the newer knowledge on the subject of pancreatitis.

Four international meetings have been held during the past 40 years in an attempt to develop a clinically useful classification of inflammatory diseases of the pancreas. The meetings have enhanced our understanding of pancreatitis, although there is still no ideal classification (6). Molecular and cell biology research during the last decade has elucidated pathophysiological factors which are involved in the pathogenesis of chronic pancreatitis, but no common pathway between a factor of etiology or pathogenesis and development of the disease has been found.

References