

## EDITORIAL



# Asperger's syndrome – about time to rename it?

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As Editor-in-Chief of *Pediatric Research*, I was both delighted and fascinated to be asked to moderate the Historic Perspectives session during the 2023 Pediatric Academic Societies' meeting. I was aghast when I learned about the impact of Naziism on pediatrics in Vienna in the 1930s and 1940s, which had lasting effects. I appreciated, in hindsight, that although I was born after this period in history, what the Nazis had done during the Holocaust had a powerful impact on my family. When we discussed these events, it was incomprehensible that humans could treat other humans in that manner.

However, the scientific presentation during the PAS meeting disturbed me profoundly because I learned that some pediatricians of that era were engaged in murdering children.<sup>1,2</sup> This killing of children was separate from the estimated 1.5 million mostly Jewish children killed in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. In Germany and Austria, another type of child murder was practiced even before the war, that of Child Euthanasia. "Kinder-Euthanasie" was the organized killing of children up to 16 years of age who were diagnosed as severely mentally or physically disabled. The practice of Kinder-Euthanasie occurred during the Nazi era in several dozen children's wards. At least 5000 children, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were murdered in this manner, predating the killing of children in concentration camps during the Holocaust.

Dr Hans Asperger was a Viennese pediatrician engaged in this practice. Famous for his work on autism, his activities with the Kinder-Euthanasie were hidden under his scholarship. In 1981, a year after Dr Asperger's death, a British psychiatrist defined autism spectrum disorder and named it Asperger syndrome. Dr Asperger was romanticized as a kind and caring physician who strove to save children from death in Nazi Vienna. Over time, historians realized that Dr Asperger described himself as a eugenicist who participated in murdering children at AM Spiegelgrund, a notorious clinic where hundreds of children were murdered during the Nazi era. And even when this history first came to light, it was very controversial ([The Horrifying Nazi Roots of the Doctor After Whom Asperger's Syndrome Is Named | History News Network](#)). Now, Dr Asperger's role has been firmly established ([The truth about Hans Asperger's Nazi collusion | Department of History \(stanford.edu\)](#)). In this edition of *Pediatric Research*, Dr Daniel Neuspiel outlines the history of pediatrics during the Nazi era, including that of Dr Asperger. For a deeper account of Dr Asperger's involvement, read the NPR interview with Edith Sheffer, the author of "Asperger's Children, the Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna" ([Doctor Behind Asperger's Syndrome Subject To Name Change: NPR](#)).

Asperger Syndrome is not alone in being the only medical eponym with Nazi associations. Other conditions have been named after persons associated with Nazis. Table 1 is a partial list of such eponyms along with suggested replacement terms, and a brief description of the original name's association with Naziism

([List of medical eponyms with Nazi associations – Wikipedia](#)). Other eponyms with Nazi associations are listed elsewhere.

I believe that we, as a group of individuals whose mission is to improve the lives of children, need to eradicate Asperger's name from use in our medical profession. The DSM-5 no longer lists "Asperger Syndrome" as a diagnosis, not as a political statement but because Asperger syndrome has been recategorized within Autism Spectrum Disorder due to overlapping features and ending its position as a stand-alone diagnosis ([The truth about Hans Asperger's Nazi collusion | Department of History \(stanford.edu\)](#)). Lastly, this name must be eradicated for possibly generating a wrong, positive association in the unaware public.

From this time forward, *Pediatric Research* will only use alternative non-eponymous names for any disease or condition given an eponymous name. Should there be a lack of an alternative title, *Pediatric Research* through its editorial and commentary process, will advocate for an alternative name. The reasons for this decision are two-fold: (1) the ethical background of an individual whose name is used as an eponym is often unknown. It is difficult and time-consuming to investigate these individuals. Therefore, to avoid situations such as the one with autism spectrum disorder, we will use non-eponymous alternative names; and (2) the vast majority of these names are for white, privileged males of former eras. These names do not acknowledge others who substantially contributed to the discovery, description and mechanism underlying these diseases but may not have had the position of power or privilege necessary for the medical field in that era to honor them (e.g., Blalock–Taussig Shunt, rather than Blalock–Taussig–Thomas Shunt).

Thus, we, as the Editor-in-Chiefs, the Editorial Office and the following members of the editorial board of *Pediatric Research*, will no longer publish any manuscript that refers to "Asperger Syndrome." His name will be expunged from *Pediatric Research* from this time forward. We call upon the editors and editorial boards of other pediatric journals to do the same.

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**Table 1.** List of eponyms [List of medical eponyms with Nazi associations – Wikipedia].

Term	Replacement term	Named after	Nazi association of term
Asperger syndrome	Autism spectrum disorder	Hans Asperger	Hans Asperger “managed to accommodate himself to the Nazi regime and was rewarded for his affirmations of loyalty with career opportunities. He joined several organizations affiliated with the NSDAP (although not the Nazi party itself), publicly legitimized race hygiene policies including forced sterilizations and, on several occasions, actively cooperated with the child ‘euthanasia’ program.” [6]
Beck–Ibrahim disease	Congenital cutaneous candidiasis	Yusuf Ibrahim	“After the war, a commission investigating his activities concluded that Dr. Ibrahim supported the Nazi euthanasia program.” [2]
Cauchois–Eppinger–Frugoni syndrome	Portal vein thrombosis	Hans Eppinger	“[Eppinger] conducted cruel experiments on Romani prisoners in the Dachau concentration camp in order to test the potability of seawater. ... Eppinger committed suicide with poison on 25 September 1946, one month before he was scheduled to testify in Nuremberg.” [2]
Clara cell	Club cell	Max Clara	Max Clara “owed his career advancement in no small way to his membership in the Nazi party and active support of its programme.” In his 1937 paper, Clara acknowledges that the sample he based his work on “was obtained from a prisoner executed by the Nazi ‘justice system’” [7] [8]
Hallervorden–Spatz disease	Pantothenate kinase-associated neurodegeneration	Julius Hallervorden, Hugo Spatz	“[Julius Hallervorden] readily admitted that 697 brains he investigated during the Nazi period were from victims of euthanasia. It is alleged that he was present at the killing of more than 60 children and adolescents in the Brandenburg Psychiatric Institution on 28 October 1940. He was reported to have removed brain material himself from euthanasia victims in a nearby extermination (euthanasia) center.” (See also Spatz–Stiefler reaction below) [2] [3]
Reiter’s syndrome	Reactive arthritis	Hans Conrad Julius Reiter	“During World War II, Reiter, a physician leader of the Nazi party, authorized medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners. Because of this, some physicians have argued against further use of the Reiter eponym.” [1]
Seitelberger disease	Infantile neuroaxonal dystrophy	Franz Seitelberger [de]	“Franz Seitelberger, a Vienna neurologist and former member of the SS, [...] although never involved in the planning or execution of NS-euthanasia, benefited from it scientifically during the post-war period. Examining the brains of 3 ‘euthanasia’ victims from the Landesanstalt Görden in Brandenburg, Seitelberger earned his PhD in 1954 under the supervision of Julius Hallervorden.” [3]
Spatz–Stiefler reaction	Paralysis agitans reaction	Hugo Spatz, Georg Stiefler	“Under Spatz’s control and direction, the brain research institute collaborated with the killing institute at Brandenburg–Gorden, obtaining hundreds of brains from the mentally ill of all ages.” [2]
Van Bogaert–Scherer–Epstein syndrome	Cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis	Hans Joachim Scherer [de]	“During the war, [Scherer] worked at the Neurology Institute in Breslau, Silesia. Here Scherer was directly involved in neuropathological brain analyses of over 300 Polish and German children euthanized in the nearby Loben Psychiatric Clinic for Youth.” [2] [3]

Table 1. continued

Term	Replacement term	Named after	Nazi association of term
Wegener's granulomatosis	Granulomatosis with polyangiitis	Friedrich Wegener	"The facts we have uncovered do not prove Dr Friedrich Wegener guilty of war crimes. However, the evidence suggests that Dr Wegener was, at least at some point of his career, a follower of the Nazi regime. Dr Wegener's mentor, <a href="#">Martin Staemmler [de]</a> , was an ardent supporter of the <a href="#">racial hygiene</a> . In addition, our data indicate that Dr Wegener was wanted by Polish authorities and that his files were forwarded to the United Nations War Crimes Commission. Finally, Dr Wegener worked in close proximity to the genocide machinery in Lodz." [9]
Wiskott–Aldrich syndrome	n/a	Alfred Wiskott	"Wiskott was the director of Dr.-von-Haunersches Kinderspital. After the war he testified for the defense in the Hamburg Ravensbruck trials." [10]
Rett syndrome	n/a	Andreas Rett	The term "Rett syndrome" is named after Andreas Rett, an Austrian neurologist and a member of the Hitler Jugend and the Nazi Party as a child and young adult. In recent years he has also been criticized for using research data derived from the Nazi program of <a href="#">Aktion T4</a> , which was the name given to the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of people, including of children, under the guise of medical euthanasia.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.