

# Acantholysis or the Auspitz sign? A revelation of the life of Carl Heinrich Auspitz

Shahajah Shareef, Faizah Shareef, Emily Tongdee<sup>1</sup>, Mercedes Florez-White<sup>1</sup>

Carl Heinrich Auspitz was born in Nikolsburg, now known as Mikulov, in the Czech Republic in 1835.<sup>1</sup> He studied at the Medical School of Vienna University under the direction of dermatologist Ferdinand Ritter von Hebra and joined Hebra's skin department around the year 1863.<sup>1</sup> During his time there, he made outstanding contributions to the field of dermatology and public health.<sup>1</sup> To many, Carl Auspitz is recognized for describing the "Auspitz phenomenon," a clinical aid in the diagnosis of psoriasis.<sup>1</sup>

The key attribution that Auspitz made to the description of psoriasis was his indication of the presence of pinpoint bleeding of papillary vessels under readily detachable scaly plaques.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to what the name suggests, Auspitz was not the first to describe this particular diagnostic measure that we know today as the Auspitz sign. Twenty years preceding his work, Hebra, Cazenave and Rayer commented on psoriasis, albeit simply mentioning redness of the skin beneath the scales.<sup>1</sup> Auspitz's mentor Hebra as well as Marie-Guillaume-Alphonse Devergie were actually the first to note this diagnostic clue that Auspitz was credited for.<sup>1</sup> One reason leading to the misnomer was Auspitz's meticulous writing on the general pathology and therapeutics of the skin published in Hugo Ziemssen's Handbook of Diseases of the Skin.<sup>1</sup>

Auspitz's true discovery was comparatively less recognized. He was the first to coin the term and describe the detailed histopathology of

acantholysis in his System of Skin Diseases in 1881.<sup>3</sup> In his novel take on the indicative benchmarks of the disease, Auspitz described acantholysis as the lifting of the epidermis causing a separation seen in the stratum spinosum.<sup>2</sup> This dermatopathologic finding is still used today as a distinguishing characteristic seen in pemphigus and other blistering epidermal diseases. Ironically, he was not formally given credit for this discovery. Rather, his work was largely forgotten until 1936 when Darier *et al.* resuscitated the concept.<sup>3</sup>

In 1869, Auspitz cofounded and coedited the Archiv fur Dermatologie und Syphilis, a pioneering publication in dermatology.<sup>1</sup> Between 1871 and 1872, he received the Golden Medal of Merit for his service during the epidemic of smallpox in Vienna.<sup>1</sup> In 1884, Auspitz gained chairmanship of the Department of Syphilology at the Vienna General Hospital.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Auspitz was not able to succeed against his rival Moritz Kaposi for Hebra's chair.<sup>1</sup> Auspitz's only son died young and his beloved wife died shortly after.<sup>1</sup> Through all of these unfortunate circumstances, Auspitz displayed his strong-willed character and unstoppable drive.<sup>1</sup> After fighting a progressive heart ailment for many years, he died on May 23, 1885.<sup>1</sup>

Inscribed into dermatologic lore are the two phenomena of the Auspitz sign and acantholysis.<sup>1</sup> We are deeply indebted to this gifted man, who advanced our understanding of dermatology and venereology during his short and tragic, but prolific life.

Department of Dermatology, College of Osteopathic Medicine, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, <sup>1</sup>Department of Dermatology, Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA

**Correspondence:** Dr. Emily Tongdee,  
BS 2810 SW 149<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Miami, FL 33185, USA.  
E-mail: etong001@fiu.edu

## References

- Holubar K. The man behind the eponym. Remembering Heinrich Auspitz. *Am J Dermatopathol* 1986;8:83-5.
- Ziemssen HV. Handbook of Diseases of the Skin. New York: Wood; 1885.
- King DF. Modern textbooks of dermatopathology and acantholysis of Auspitz. *J Am Acad Dermatol* 1984;11(2 Pt 1):301-3.

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

**How to cite this article:** Shareef S, Shareef F, Tongdee E, Florez-White M. Acantholysis or the Auspitz sign? A revelation of the life of Carl Heinrich Auspitz. *Indian J Dermatol Venereol Leprol* 2017;83:512.

**Received:** August, 2016. **Accepted:** December, 2016.

## Access this article online

### Quick Response Code:



### Website:

www.ijdv.com

### DOI:

10.4103/ijdv.IJDVL\_785\_16