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The haematogenous theory of metastasis: Récamier did not propose it

Sirs:

The work of the French physician, Joseph Claude Anthelme Récamier (1774–1852) is regularly quoted as an historical reference for the concept of metastasis, and particularly as the first report of the dissemination of cancer cells via the bloodstream. For example, Lance A. Liotta wrote in 1992 that “He (Récamier) was the first to provide anatomical evidence that metastases were caused by cancer cells that enter the circulation and travel to distance sites in the body” [2]. In the course of our work we have obtained data suggesting that this might not be so. We therefore examined Récamier’s 1829 treatise “*Recherches sur le traitement du cancer par la compression méthodique simple ou combinée et sur l’histoire générale de la même maladie*” [4] to determine exactly what he had done. We were somewhat surprised to find that what Récamier actually wrote was quite different from what is now imputed to him. He was undoubtedly the first person to use the term metastasis, and he certainly regarded the veins as “les signes de sa propagation hors du foyer primitif” [indications of its (cancer’s) propagation outside its primary site]. But in fact, Récamier’s view of metastasis is summarized in the following statement (p. 78): “Si l’on considère comment l’état cancéreux se propage en suivant la continuité des tissus, ce que je viens de dire de sa propagation le long des parois veineuses ne paraîtra pas hasardé” [which translates as: if one considers how the cancerous state propagates itself by following the continuity of tissues, what I just said about its propagation along the walls of veins will not appear rash].

It seems to us that the current misinterpretation of Récamier’s position stems directly from an inaccurate reading of an article published in 1956 by Robert Jay Wilder [5], who in fact stated: “Récamier also described the local infiltration of cancer and the invasion of the veins by cancer ...”

Thus, although the dissemination of cancer via the blood and/or lymph is widely accepted [1], at least one of the pioneers in the field was not of that opinion. Later workers, notably Virchow, also had a tissue-based concept of metastasis, and there is now some work suggesting an intramesenchymal dissemination of cancer associated with specific features of tissues [3]. This type of tumour spread might be a further mode of dissemination in addition to the haematogenous mechanism.

References

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