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NOTABLE NOTES

The Men or Women Behind Nevi: Paul Gerson Unna

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An eponym is a person after which a particular place, object, discovery, disease, syndrome, and so forth, is named. The man behind the Unna nevus is Paul Gerson Unna. Unna nevus was called primarily "soft nevus" by Unna himself in his landmark work, *Histopathology of Diseases of the Skin*, published in 1896. Unna pictured a nevus that resembled an acrochordon: typically an exophytic, soft in consistency, papillomatous dermal nevus. Unna nevus is often regarded as a trivial nevus but "... no nevus is normal; all are pathological."¹

Unna was born on September 8, 1850, in Hamburg, Germany. His maternal grandfather was the highly respected physician George Hartog Gerson, whose name Unna took as his middle name in 1870. He was educated at the universities of Heidelberg, Leipzig, and Strasbourg. His studies at Heidelberg were interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War, in which Unna suffered a severe battle wound at Le Mans in 1871. Because of this injury, he was granted a pension by his government, which in later years he gave as prizes for his students.

He was a prodigious worker and a prolific writer, who enhanced the clinical description of a number of cutaneous disorders. In 1887, he was the first to describe seborrheic dermatitis, and he excelled in the development of dermatopathology. For example, he introduced new terms like *spongiosis* and *ballooning degeneration* and characterized the layers of the epidermis. He said that "dermatology should never stop evaluating the clinical findings with a histologically-trained eye and looking at the histologic image with the eyes of a clinician."²

Unna introduced new therapeutic substances into dermatologic care²: for example, ichtyol, resorcin, and *Eucerit* (from the Greek word meaning "beautiful wax"), which was the first oil-water emulsion and is still the basis of many commercial moisturizers. Unna created his own dermatologic training institute, which he called *Dermatologikum*, which was comfortably housed in a villa where the hospital building, as well as the library and his private residence stood.³ He was also interested in philosophy; his first publication was on the conscience. He became a follower of the monistic materialism movement which attempted to explain all phenomena on a physical basis and opposed the dogmatic Christian beliefs.² Unna, an eclectic person, was also a sublime cellist.

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