Villemin, Jean Antoine, 1827–1892

Summary Article: Villemin, Jean-Antoine
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French military physician who provided early evidence that tuberculosis (TB) is transmitted and caused by an infective agent. Contrary to popular belief, Villemin proved that TB could be passed from humans or cows to rabbits, and from these rabbits, to other rabbits in a series. He also proved that the disease in the rabbit when passed from a cow was considerably worse than when passed from a person.

In 1865, Villemin inoculated a healthy rabbit with TB material obtained from the lung cavity of a human who had died of pulmonary tuberculosis. Another rabbit from the same mother was kept under identical conditions to the inoculated rabbit as a control. The rabbits were killed after three and a half months. The inoculated rabbit’s lungs were full of TB lesions, while the control rabbit showed no symptoms of the disease.

He went on to inoculate a rabbit with TB material obtained from the lung of cow. This rabbit became acutely ill after two months. Its organs showed acute TB on post mortem. Villemin then inoculated a series of six rabbits with material obtained from the lesions of rabbit lungs. His experiments proved that TB could be transmitted from animal to animal and between species in a series.

Villemin was born in Prey, Vosges and studied medicine in Strasbourg and Paris, where he received his MD 1853. He worked as a general practitioner but ran his own private research laboratory in his spare time. The nature of the infective micro-organism was not discovered for another twenty years until the work of the German bacteriologist Robert Koch 1882.

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