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We Hear From

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From
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Max von Pettenkofer : His Life , His Death and our Population Crisis

OUR LABORATORY IN THE MUNICH UNIVERSITY Children's Hospital is just facing the Max von Pettenkofer Institute situated on Pettenkofer Street in the city centre. Today at the 100th year of death of Max von Pettenkofer, the people of Munich remember thankfully the life and work of this great scholar, who founded the concept of Public Hygiene. His death was also very spectacular and make us think seriously in the context of the modern population structure.

While working in the pharmacy of the Royal

Residence of Bavarian King in Munich as an apprentice, Max Pettenkofer had the opportunity to study chemistry. After successful completion of this study, he obtained a stipend and studied medicine and engaged himself to teach pharmacology. At that time, the population of Munich was rising rapidly and the hygienic conditions became alarming. The city suffered regularly from epidemics of cholera, diarrhoea, etc. Pettenkofer then fought hard to keep the water supply clean, separating it strictly from sewage. With his simple measure, he could save

thousands of lives while Robert Koch in Berlin and Louis Pasteur in Paris frantically looking for vaccines and antibacterial substances. Munich was saved and once again became an attractive city. The King of Bavaria promoted him to Nobility: Max Pettenkofer became Max von Pettenkofer.

The death of this glorious citizen of Munich was abrupt and thought-provoking. This reminds me of a prize-winning Japanese film, viewed at the 1983 Honolulu Film Festival, which narrated a 400-year-old story. The grandson in a three generation household of a Japanese village was attaining marriageable age. The grandmother happily watched the courtship of her grandson with a village girl. At the second thought, the granny was worried : their house was small and the last harvest was very poor. The stored rice might not be sufficient for the period till the next harvest. The last leaves of the trees were falling. Autumn was awaiting winter. The old lady decided to go for *narayama*. With two blankets and some water and food for a few days, she prepared herself to leave the house, the village and the society. She took leave and with the help of her grandchild, climbed to a high mountain nearby and took farewell from him in order to be nearer to God. The grandson came back to the village and a severe snow storm came and frost followed. It reminds us of the old Indian ritual of *Banaparstha*, ie, the last phase of life when old persons retired from the society and entered the woods to be able to serve God undisturbed. Exhaustion, hunger, snakes and other wild animals might do the rest!

Today, the population pressure on our planet is rising alarmingly in a threefold way : increase in number, increase in longevity and increase in individual members in size and weight. Old and disabled persons are often kept alive with all kinds of prosthetics and various equipment to support their failing physiology, often causing them and their relatives severe sufferings. On the other hand, the population pressure in the form of want of jobs, housing and transport compel young people to choose for abortion or childlessness.

At the age of 83, Max von Pettenkofer was suffering apparently from dementia (Alzheimer's disease) and he felt often irritated because of failure of thought and memory. But still innovative, he could manage to obtain a revolver and with a bullet in the head he could finish his sufferings and got *Erlösung*, ie, release — *moksha* or *nirvana*.

We cannot choose our birth, but we may be able to choose our death by retiring from this world in honour. Such option may also be welcome for persons of any age suffering incurable and painful ailments. Pettenkofer, the glorious citizen of Munich, presented a valuable guideline.

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