August Paul von Wasserman Biography

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Biography

August Paul von Wasserman was a German physician and bacteriologist. He is most noteworthy in the **history of microbiology** for his invention of the first test for the sexually transmitted disease of **syphilis**. The test is known as the **Wasserman test**.

Wasserman was born in 1866 in Bamberg, Germany. His entire education was received in that country. Wasserman received his undergraduate bacteriology degree and medical training at the universities of Erlanger, Vienna, Munich, and Strasbourg. He graduated from Strasbourg in 1888. Beginning in 1890, Wasserman joined **Robert Koch** at the latter's Institute for Infectious Diseases in Berlin. He became head of the institute's Department of Therapeutics and Serum research in 1907. In 1913, Wasserman left the Koch institute and joined the faculty at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, where he served as the Director of Experimental Therapeutics until his death in 1925.

Wasserman is remembered for a number of bacteriological accomplishments. He devised a test for **tuberculosis** and developed an antitoxin that was active against **diphtheria**. But his most noteworthy accomplishment occurred while he was still at the Institute for Infectious Diseases. In 1906, he developed a test for the presence of *Treponema pallidum* in humans. The bacterium is a spirochaete and is the cause of syphilis. The test became known as the Wasserman test.

The basis of the test is the production of antibodies to the syphilis bacterium and the ability of those antibodies to combine with known antigens in a solution. The antibody-antigen combination prevents a component called **complement** from subsequently destroying red blood cells. Clearing of the test solution (e.g., destruction of the red blood cells) is diagnostic for the absence of antibodies to *Treponema pallidum*.

The Wasserman test represents the first so-called complement test. In the decades since its introduction the Wasserman's test for syphilis has been largely superseded by other methods. But, the test is still reliable enough to be performed even to the present day in the diagnosis of syphilis.