Richard Kuhn Biography

Richard Kuhn

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Biography

Born in Vienna, Austria, Richard Kuhn spent most of his adult life in Germany, obtaining his Ph.D. from the University of Munich in 1922. In 1929, he received an appointment as professor of chemistry at the University of Heidelberg where he remained for the rest of his career.

Kuhn was intrigued by both vitamins and by carotenoids, which are fat -soluble yellow coloring agents widely distributed in nature. In 1933, he was able to combine his two interests: with his coworkers, he showed that vitamin B2--isolated from milk and called lactoflavin--was the same as Otto Warburg's so-called "yellow enzyme." Two years later, the research team synthesized and structurally identified the vitamin. (Kuhn announced his synthesis at virtually the same time as did Paul Karrer (1889-1971), another noted chemist who was conducting similar research experiments in Zurich, Switzerland. He and Karrer synthesized vitamin A at roughly the same time as well.)

In 1938, Kuhn and George Wendt isolated another member of the B family, vitamin B6 (pyridoxine). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry that same year but because Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) refused to allow Germans to accept such awards, Kuhn was forced to refuse the prize. He accepted it, however, after World War II had ended. Kuhn synthesized a number of other vitamins (including pantothenic acid in 1939) and vitamin analogues.

In his later years, he spent most of his time investigating the factors involved in biological reactions. In the 1960s, for instance, Kuhn conducted a number of experiments that concerned human resistance to influenza viruses.