Theodor Boveri Biography

Theodor Boveri

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Biography

Theodor Boveri was born on October 12, 1862, in Bamberg, Germany. He began his scientific career in 1881 as a student at the University of Munich. His original intent upon entering the university had been to study history and philosophy, but he soon decided to change his direction and concentrate on the natural sciences. He graduated in 1885, and in 1893, he became a professor of zoology and comparative anatomy at the University of Würzburg, where he remained for the rest of his career.

One of Boveri's contemporaries, Edouard van Beneden, was making exciting discoveries about chromosomes in the eggs of a species of roundworm during the 1880s. He found that the chromosome number is constant for each species, and that the chromosome number is reduced by half as reproductive cells are formed--a process we now know as meiosis. Van Beneden suggested that chromosomes represent continuous elements of heredity, but his reports were inconclusive.

It was Boveri, with his excellent powers of observation and interpretation, who proved that chromosomes were independent entities. He emphasized that they were organized structures. When Boveri first began his work, it was not yet known whether each chromosome contained factors responsible for the total development or whether each chromosome differed from others in being responsible for only particular hereditary features. Boveri's discoveries made it clear that certain chromosomes were responsible for certain characteristics. According to Edmund Wilson, a distinguished American cytologist, Boveri's theory provided the working basis for nearly all cytological interpretations of genetic phenomena.

Around 1887, Boveri and Van Beneden independently discovered a small structure that connects the chromosomes during cell division. Boveri called it the centrosome. He went on to demonstrate that it provided the division centers for the dividing egg cell and all its offspring.

Boveri paid a price for his outstanding scientific abilities. He was prone to bouts of depression and suffered numerous physical breakdowns. His health got progressively worse following the onset of World War I, and he died at the age of 53 in 1915.