



## Goebbels' clubfoot: a case of osteomyelitis?

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Dear Editor,

Clubfoot (*talipes equinovarus*) is a common congenital defect, present in 1–2/1000 deliveries. It is mostly due to a genetic defect or to intrauterine damage induced by maternal smoking, diabetes or breech presentation [1]. Occasionally, clubfoot has been reported due to a leg trauma damaging the peroneal nerve or to osteomyelitis [2]. Clubfoot description is present in Flaubert's Madame Bovary and it is graphically represented in Ribera's and Murillo's paintings. Famous clubfoot bearers were Roman Emperor Claudius, British writers George Gordon Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott, Napoleon's Foreign Minister, Claude Maurice de Talleyrand, and Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945), Minister of Propaganda of the Third Reich, whose clubfoot was nicknamed the "Devil's hoof" [3]. Goebbels' handicap was surrounded by mystery, as he tried to conceal it in every way possible. However, at autopsy, Soviet physicians confirmed that Goebbels had a right clubfoot: "the right foot sole is twisted inward to such a degree that it stands virtually at a right angle to the leg bone" [4] (Fig. 1a, b). Goebbels' clubfoot etiology is still subject of controversy. Some authors attribute his clubfoot to genetic causes [5] while others to an acquired defect [6, 7].

He started complaining of right leg pain when he was about 3–7 years old. At 10 years, he had "an excruciating

right foot pain after a long family walk to Geistenbeck one Sunday" [5]. He underwent surgery at the Maria-Hilf Hospital in Monchengladbach without success. Goebbels later wrote that "he could no longer run and jump like the other children". After that episode, "Joseph's foot was lamed for life, would fail to grow properly, and would eventually develop into a clubfoot" [6]. Langerich suggests that Goebbels had a neurogenic clubfoot due to a metabolic disorder in childhood [5]. WL Shirer, an American journalist living in Berlin in the Thirties reports that Goebbels attributed the cause of his clubfoot to osteomyelitis [8]; however, sometimes, Goebbels attributed the defect to an accident [9]; while other authors attribute it to poliomyelitis [3, 6].

We propose that Goebbels might have hematogenous osteomyelitis. In children the source of bacteremia leading to osteomyelitis is usually inapparent. Perhaps a blunt trauma causing the excruciating right foot pain he reported at 10 after a long walk could be the source of bacteremia. There are other less likely possibilities for hematogenous osteomyelitis in his biography. Goebbels' childhood was overshadowed by poor health and he had pneumonia as an infant. He reported having "inflammation of the lungs with terrifying delirium" [6]. This pneumonia could be due to *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Streptococcus pyogenes* ( $\beta$ -hemolytic group A) or *Staphylococcus aureus*. The microorganism might have

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**Fig. 1** **a** Joseph Goebbels' leg brace. The orthopedic device was one of the key elements used for Goebbels' post-mortem identification in Berlin (1945); **b** close-up of Joseph Goebbels' leg brace. Credits

spread hematogenously to the right tibia and/or fibula, damaging their lower metaphysis and perhaps the right peroneal nerve, stopping the bone growth, shortening the right limb and enhancing the development of a clubfoot years after the pulmonary infection [10–12]. However, in the pre-antibiotic era, the fatality rates with *S. aureus* or streptococcal haematogenous pneumonia and osteomyelitis in children would probably be very high, surely above 50%; therefore, this hypothesis is unlikely.

It is not unconceivable that Goebbels, Hitler's master of the Aryan racial puritanism and *white supremacy*, was lying about his clubfoot's etiology to get rid of the stigma of an inherited defect. The Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring (*Ger. Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*) or "Sterilization Law" was enacted on July 14, 1933 in Nazi Germany and put into effect in January 1934 and allowed compulsory sterilization of any citizen who, in the opinion of a "Genetic Health Court" (Gr. Erbgesundheitsgericht), suffered from a list of alleged genetic disorders [11–13]. Many of the so-called "genetic disorders" were not truly genetic; some authors claim that clubfoot was erased from the list of genetic diseases, as it was Goebbels' disease [14].

Goebbels stated that a part of his propaganda strategy was to "repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth". In this specific case, we believe that Goebbels genuinely described the pathological condition that plagued his life.

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### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Statement on human and animal rights** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed consent** None.

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