German doctors apologise for the crimes perpetrated by Nazi doctors

To the Editor: In his article on the German Medical Association's apology for medical crimes under Nazism, Weisz states "One can but hope that it will be soon followed by an apology from the Austrian Medical Association".[1] Having been in Vienna on the 75th anniversary of the Anschluss (the annexation of Austria by Germany in March 1938), I would like to comment as to why I believe such an apology will be some time.

From the Anschluss until the end of the war, Austria ceased to exist. Thus, the Austrian Medical Association also ceased to exist during this period. At the time when the matter should have been addressed (1945–1955), Austria was ruled by four foreign powers (Britain, the United States, France and the Soviet Union). Therefore, the position it chose of having been a victim of Nazi aggression was one of convenience.

Austria today presupposes that the country made a clean start with the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1955. However, there is no doubt that the perpetrators of Nazi (including Austrian) medical ill deeds continued to hold positions of authority in the Second Republic. It took until the 60th anniversary of the Anschluss for the University of Vienna to acknowledge the Pernkopf affair,[2] and then only after considerable international pressure.

I agree with Weisz that the 75th anniversary would have been a timely opportunity for the Austrian Medical Association to acknowledge that some of its former members had behaved in a shameful manner during the Nazi period. Only the passage of time will allow this difficult matter to be fully explored.

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1 Weisz G. German doctors apologise for the crimes perpetrated by Nazi doctors. *Med J Aust* 2013; 198: 162-163.
2 Pringle H. The dilemma of Pernkopf's atlas. *Science* 2010; 329: 274-275.

In reply: I thank Winterton for providing important information about Austria's attitude towards its participation in Nazi atrocities.

Nazi crimes perpetrated in Austria include those at the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, where over a quarter of a million inmates perished. The Austrian government has acknowledged this by establishing the Mauthausen Memorial. However, the Austrian Medical Association remains silent. Recall Irmfried Eberl, the Austrian doctor who was the commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp. Also Austrian was the Hartheim "children's hospital", where doctors gassed with carbon monoxide up to 30 000 children with physical deformities, mental deficiencies or emotional disturbances.

After more than 70 years, it is still necessary to recall these atrocities as an educational endeavour and to prevent any repetition.

"Only the passage of time will allow this difficult matter to be fully explored"
Winterton

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