

## Special Feature

### *Escherichia coli*, 1885–1985

Theodor Escherich was born in Munich in 1857 and died in 1911. He was described as an excellent worker, whose chief interests were paediatrics and microbiology; indeed, he finally became Professor of Paediatrics in Vienna, where he carried out much work on diphtheria and intestinal infection. It is for his discovery of *Bacillus coli communis* in 1885 that he is chiefly remembered. Ten years after its discovery *B. coli communis* was being described as a non-pathogenic variety of the typhoid bacillus and in consequence was largely disregarded; at the turn of the century it was certainly not accorded pathogenic status and it received mention in bacteriology textbooks only as a water and gut organism which might be confused with *Bacillus typhosus*. The mid-1950s saw many textbooks of medical microbiology still grappling with *Bacterium (Bacillus) coli (sic)* amid complaints that the introduction of new generic names such as *Erwinia* and *Escherichia* was confusing the issue. The name *Escherichia* although proposed in 1919 by Castellani and Chalmers, was only ratified by the International Committee on Microbiology in 1953. Few of the taxonomists making that decision can have foreseen the information explosion that *Escherichia coli* was to generate within the next thirty years.

The following invited papers present an overview, necessarily selective, of our current knowledge of *Escherichia coli*.