



Röntgen's x-ray of a hand

Wilhelm RÖNTGEN

(1845-1923)

On Nov. 8, 1895, Wilhelm Röntgen's attention was drawn to a fluorescent glow on a nearby table. Röntgen immediately determined that the fluorescence was caused by invisible rays originating from an electron discharge tube. Surprisingly, these mysterious rays penetrated the opaque black paper wrapped around the tube. Röntgen had discovered X-rays, a momentous event that instantly revolutionized the field of physics and medicine. He would call them "X-rays" because the letter X is often used in mathematics to refer to an unknown quantity.

Röntgen spent two months thoroughly studying the properties of X-rays and received the first Nobel Prize in physics in 1901. When later asked what his thoughts were at the moment of his discovery, he replied, "I didn't think. I investigated." It was the crowning achievement in his career. Röntgen refused to take out any patents so that the world could freely benefit from his work.

