Rene Laennec

Rene-Theophile-Hyacinthe Laennec was born on the 17th February 1781 and went on to become one of France’s leading medical luminaries.

At the age of twelve he was sent to Nantes where his uncle was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and he became a very keen student. However, his father was against the son being a doctor and called him back. In 1799 he went back to the study of medicine and learnt under famous physicians like Corvisart and Dupuytren.

In 1822 he became a lecturer at the College of France and in 1823 he was promoted to be a Professor.

Though known principally for the invention of the first stethoscope, he was also known for his contributions in other fields like liver diseases and tuberculosis.

At that time auscultation was done by putting one’s ear against the patient’s chest which was not only inadequate in the case of corpulent patients but also embarrassing when it came to examining female patients.

In September 1816 while taking a walk, he observed two children playing by sending messages to each other. The simple way to do so was to use a long piece of solid wood and a pin. With the ear applied to one end of the wood piece the child could hear the amplified sounds of the pin scratching the other end of the piece. This set him thinking that, perhaps, he could use a similar method to auscultate the human chest. His first instrument was a hollow wooden cylinder 25 cm x 2.5 cm.

He published his finding in, “De L’auscultation Médiate” in 1819. Part of which is reproduced:

In 1816, I was consulted by a young woman labouring under general symptoms of diseased heart, and in whose case percussion and the application of the hand were of little avail on account of the great degree of fatness. The other method just mentioned [direct auscultation] being rendered inadmissible by the age and sex of the patient, I happened to recollect a simple and well-known fact in acoustics... the great distinctness with which we hear the scratch of a pin at one end of a piece of wood on applying our ear to the other. Immediately, on this suggestion, I rolled a quire of paper into a kind of cylinder and applied one end of it to the region of the heart and the other to my ear, and was not a little surprised and pleased to find that I could thereby perceive the action of the heart in a manner much more clear and distinct than I had ever been able to do by the immediate application of my ear.

He published the findings in 1819. His new instrument was given the name stethoscope, deriving from stethos (chest) and skopos (examination). Unfortunately, like all new inventions the stethoscope was not welcomed by all. His instrument consisted of three detachable parts. Later on the instrument was modified by Arthur Lear and George Cammann to become the binaural instrument that is used today.

He was keenly interested in chest diseases and used the stethoscope to delineate terms like rales, rhonchi, etc. He was a pioneer in describing bronchiectasis. He proved that the little tubercles seen in organs at autopsy were due to tuberculosis.

He was interested in diseases of the liver and coined the term, “cirrhosis” to describe nodules of the liver and what is now known as Laennec’s cirrhosis. He also coined the term melanoma. Terms used today also include Laennec-Hammam symptom, Laennec-Muller-Hammam murmur and Laennec’s thrombus.

He was among one of the first doctors to conduct autopsies to learn more of the human body and pathology.

His final appointment was as Head of the Medical Clinic at the Hopital de la Charite. He was made Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1984. He died in 1986, of the same tuberculosis he had spent most of his life studying, at the age of 45.

At the Claude Bernard University in Lyon one of the medical schools is named after him.

References


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