Joseph Leopold Auenbrugger- Founder of Percussion Technique

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Auenbrugger (1722-1809) was born in Styria, Austria. He was the son of an innkeeper and studied the variation in percussion notes over the different areas of chest and sensed the possibility of interpreting clinical findings ante-mortem. At that time, pulse and respiration were the principal tools of examination, of patients suffering from diseases of chest.

Knowledge of acoustics and sound, an interest in music and his familiarity with tapping the wine barrels in his father’s inn, helped Auenbrugger develop the science of percussion. An empty barrel or a normal chest, gave a resonant sound on percussion, while a barrel filled with wine or the pleural cavity filled with an effusion, gave out a different note. He was also able to outline the cardiac size in health and disease.

Seven years were required to develop the method, check autopsies and experiment on cadavers at the Spanish Hospital. Based upon observations verified by post mortem experiences and experiment, fluids injected in cadaver chest localised pectoral fremitus. He ascertained the sounds produced by tapping over into bedside practice, including treatment by thoracentesis. His treatise was published in Latin in 1761. Auenbrugger used only 1200 words to state the purpose of his communications and interpretation of his experiments. His book is the first record of the use of immediate percussion of the chest in diagnosis. This elicited some praise, but more criticism. Haller, Stoll and Ludwig were supportive, but other’s criticism was responsible for his forced resignation from the Hospital and his resumption of full-time practice in Vienna.

Almost 40 years elapsed, before clinicians accepted his method and used it in clinical diagnosis and treatment. The French, led by Corvisart, physician to Napoleon, took it up in 1808, one year before its author’s death. Although Corvisart might easily have revamped the idea of percussion as his own discovery, he says with fine feeling that he would not sacrifice the name of Auenbrugger to personal vanity. The original treatise was translated, revised and expanded by Corvisart, supplemented by his personal observations. Corvisart’s combined formulated system of clinical instructions along with auscultation was stressed in the first issue- first volume of New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery in 1812.

Auenbrugger was genial, inflexibly honest, and unassuming, loving science for its own sake. He was indeed a noble example of the substantial worth and charm of old-fashioned German character at its very best. He devoted himself to the practice of medicine and the enjoyment of music, in the golden splendor of Vienna, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, having found favour with Empress Maria Theresa, who raised him to the knighthood in 1784.