Jean Corvisart (1755-1821)

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Jean Nichols Corvisart, de mortes professor in College de France, Paris was Napoleon’s personal physician. He taught famous pupils like Laennec, Dupuytren and Cuvier. He was particularly interested in the diseases of the heart and chest. He made cardiology a science and wrote one of the first treatise on heart diseases in modern medicine i.e. "Essay on diseases and organic lesions of heart and great vessels," published in 1818.

Corvisart is especially remembered because of his translation of Auenbrugger’s masterpiece on percussion of the chest, more than 40 years of its initial publication. His rediscovery of its significance was complimented by observation of his pupil Laenec on auscultation. He was a meticulous observer of the sick at the bedside and correlated his findings of physical diagnosis with anatomical changes on post mortem.

He described the Precordial thrill felt on the chest in mitral stenosis and facies of cardiac failure (Corvisart’s facies) and distinguished between cardiac hypertrophy (Corvisart’s disease) and cardiac dilatation. He also distinguished between functional and organic heart disease.

Corvisart formulated a system of clinical instructions, which epitomised the fine attributes of the French school of medicine. It was stressed in the first issue of the first volume of New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery in 1812.

Corvisart’s most famous patient, Napoleon suffered at least two significant illnesses, which responded to his clinical skill - bronchial pneumonia initially and neurodermatitis later during the triumphal entry in to Vienna in 1819. He rose to fame with Napoleon and as his physician, retired from active practice of medicine when the Emperor was abdicated. Corvisart died after a series of strokes a few months after his famous patient died in St. Helena.