Rene Theophile-Hyacinthe Laennec was a physician of early 19th century in France. He invented the stethoscope around 1814.

Prior to Laennec the examination of chest utilised palpation, auscultation by direct application of ear to the chest and then recently described method of percussion by Auenbrugger. Once Laennec was required to examine a buxom female patient at the Necker Hospital in Paris. In order to listen to her chest, at the same time preserve decorum, he rolled up 24 sheets of papers in a cylinder and was surprised to find that sounds were transmitted with more intensity. The stethoscope (Greek stethos-chest, skopion-to examine) was given this name by Laennec. The hollow paper cylinder was later replaced by wooden stethoscope concave at the examining end and fabricated of two closely fitted sections so that it could be used as a short or long instrument.

Born in 1781, Laennec completed his formal education in Paris, the centre of medicine in Europe during the stirring days of revolution and enjoyed freindship and guidance of Corvisart, the physician of Napoleon. Surgeon G Dupuytren, anatomist Baron Cuvier, were his contemporaries.

He showed great interest in diseases of chest and identified diagnostic significance of cardiac and pulmonary sounds. Laennec thus founded a new clinical method of auscultation. He described the sounds with stethoscope and coined a number of new terms including rales, pectoriloquy, aegophony and others. he published his "Traite de l auscultation mediate" in 1819, with its second edition in 1823. He differentiated bronchiectasis, pneumothorax, haemorrhagic pleurisy, pulmonary gangrene, pulmonary infarct and emphysema. He also discussed the significance of tubercle of pulmonary parenchyma. Laennec is best known among internists for his description of condition now known as atrophic cirrhosis of liver or Laennec’s cirrhosis.

A great worker, he undermined his health, contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and ironically died of consumption at the age of 46.

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