Medical Philately (Medical Theme on Stamps)

Joseph Leopold Auenbrugger (1722-1809)
Postal Stamps issued on Auenbrugger by Austria on Auenbrugger - 1937

Auenbrugger was born in Styria, Austria. He was the son of an innkeeper and studied medicine at the University of Vienna, and was a pupil of Van Swieten.

He became intrigued with 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 principle 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. 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. This elicited some praise, but more criticism. It 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, were the first to accept the new technique. The original treatise was translated, revised and expanded by Corvisart, supplemented by his personal observations.

Auenbrugger died in 1809, only a few months after Corvisart's translation was published. Endowed with great clinical capacity, he introduced the important technique of examination in clinical medicine. 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.

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