

Dr. Rene Laennec: 'From a Child's Toy to a Stethoscope'

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Vintage issues of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ), now in its 102nd year of publication, are a treasure trove of case reports, clinical and scientific advances, as well as medical lore and miscellaneous items.



Portrait by engraver and cartographer Ambroise Tardieu.

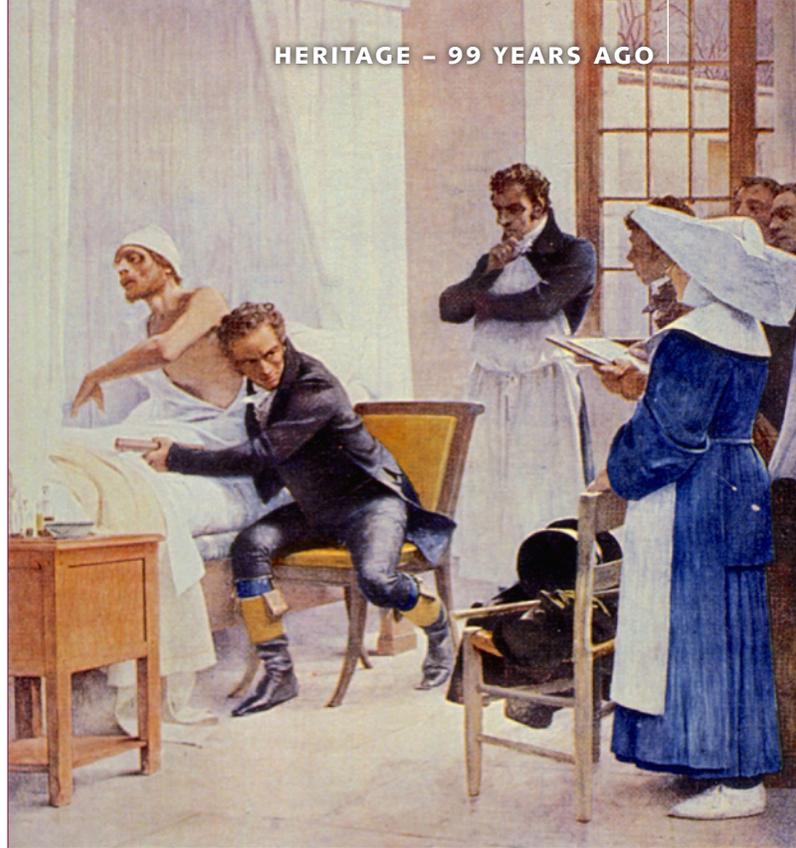
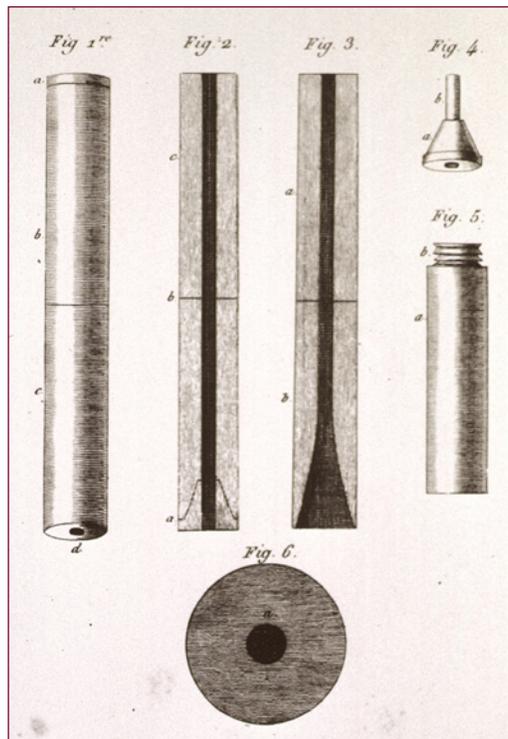
While perusing a 1920 issue recently, I came across an interesting story written by one of the editors on the invention of the stethoscope. Under the Miscellaneous section of the April 1920 issue of RIMJ, on page 82, one of the editors describes its origins in a column titled "From a Child's Toy." It recounts that more than a century earlier, **DR. RENE THEOPHILE HYACINTHE LAENNEC**, described as a pioneer in modern medicine, observed children in the Louvre gardens listening to the transmission of sounds along pieces of wood while scratching the other end with pins.

Dr. Laennec, who was also a musician who made his own flutes, realized he could use this method for

listening to breath sounds while examining a patient's lungs, rather than putting his ear on a patient's chest, and constructed prototypes of the device using paper cones, and then wooden cylinders, over a three-year period.

According to the article, Dr. Laennec gave his invention the name by which the device is still known, deriving the word stethoscope from two Greek roots, one meaning the "chest" and the other "to observe" or "regard." The first stethoscope was to be used by listening with one ear only.

In 1819, Dr. Laennec published a seminal treatise on the diagnosis of the diseases of the heart and lungs, titled *Auscultation Médiante ou Traité du Diagnostic des Maladies des Poumons et du Cœur*.



Photomechanical reproduction of bedside scene showing Dr. Laennec seated with consumptive patient; several others gathered around. (Chartran, T., artist)

RIMJ's editor then goes on to describe how the stethoscope should be used:

"The instrument should be placed on the bare chest wall. For this reason satisfactory examination of the lungs can only be made when the patient is stripped to the waist. Careless physicians sometimes attempt to examine patient's chest through the clothing. Such an examination is worthless."

A brief biography of Dr. Laennec ends the RIMJ piece, stating he was born in Quimper, Brittany, on February 17, 1781, studied medicine in Paris, and began the practice of medicine in 1804. He died in 1826 [from tuberculosis], "at the early age of 45, in the quaint old town in Brittany, in which he first saw the light."

He bequeathed his medical papers and first stethoscope to his nephew, and described it as his greatest legacy.

The first drawing of the hollow wooden cylinder stethoscope, devised by Dr. Laennec in 1816, when he worked at Necker Hospital in Paris, shows the complete instrument, longitudinal sections, the detachable chest tool, and the earpiece.

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