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Carol Weber, PhD, formerly Assistant Professor, Department of Physiology and Health Science, Ball State University, Muncie, IN. Presently — in the MPH Program, The Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, Baltimore MD 21218.

ABOUT THE COVER

LAENNEC AND THE STETHESCOPE

Rene Theophile Laennec was born at Quimper, France, February 17, 1781. Early in life, he went to live with an uncle who was a professor on the faculty of medicine at Nantes. This uncle saw to it that young Laennec received a sound basic and classical education. In his fifteenth year, Laennec was given the title of military surgeon, third class, and became an apprentice, assisting his uncle in military hospitals at Nantes. At the age of 19, he enrolled in the Ecole de Medecine and received his doctorate, June 11, 1804 at age 23.

In 1816, Laennec was appointed visiting physician to l'Hopital Necker, where the clinic presented him with the challenge that led to his greatest discovery. Laennec was familiar with palpation and percussion, and he had also learned of immediate, or direct auscultation (listening to sounds in the thorax by placing the physician's ear directly on the patient's chest wall). While pondering the problem of an obese patient suspected of having heart disease, Laennec noted a group of children at play about a pile of beams. One would place his ear against the end of a beam while another would tap the other end. Laennec, grasping the principle involved, hurried back to the clinic.

He experimented with various forms of the instrument, which he called a *stethoscope*. First, he tried a compact roll of paper, then a wand with no aperture.

A cylinder with a central aperture and a funnel-shaped opening at the applied end proved best suited for chest examinations. Various adaptations of the instrument he devised continued in use by physicians until 1855, when Dr. George Cammann, of New York developed the binaural stethoscope.

Tribute to Laennec may be found in Sigerist's writings: "Laennec was something much more than the discoverer of auscultation. He was a distinguished anatomist and a great clinician.

Laennec died of tuberculosis on August 13, 1826.



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