

RENÉ LAËNNEC'S STETHOSCOPE: A RARITY AT UPPSALA MEDICAL HISTORY MUSEUM

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One day 30 years ago, I entered the Medical History Museum in Uppsala, which had just been opened. In 1995, I was an experienced doctor, specialized in internal medicine. When entering the Uppsala museum, I just saw a lot of medical and surgical objects, operating tables, anaesthesia machines, X-ray machines, etc., but I did not see the history behind the objects.

Suddenly, I stood in front of a glass showcase with a portrait of René Laënnec (1781–1826) (Figure 1), the famous creator of the stethoscope. And beside him, I saw the original stethoscope (Figure 2)! The stethoscope was *my* instrument. I had worked with my stethoscope, day and night, during the last decades. As I became aware of this original stethoscope just in front of my eyes, time stopped. It was a moment when I suddenly realized that this was something very important, a so-called epiphany. From that moment, medical history museums became very important to me.



Figure 1. René Laënnec.



Figure 2. Laënnec's stethoscope.

The main question was: How did this object happen to come to Uppsala?

I started my investigation at Carolina, the University Library in Uppsala, where I found Laënnec's first work from 1819 in the Waller collection, *De l'Auscultation médiate* [1] where he tells the classical story.

He met with a rather fat lady who was extremely difficult to auscultate in the usual way, which was to put one's ear close to the patient's body. He heard nothing. Then, he took a sheet of paper, rolled it, and put it to his ear. And now, he could hear both the respiratory sounds and the heart sounds much better.

During three years, he developed a wooden pipe that he used for auscultation of many patients, many of them with tuberculosis. If the patients died, he autopsied them; he removed their lungs and heart. Then, he compared the pathological findings with what he had heard from the living patient's body.

In the book, he presents the dimensions of the instrument illustrating it with a drawing. Furthermore, he publishes a number of patients' anamneses and some drawings of autopsied organs. In a foot-note, he declares the name of the instrument to be a *stethoscope*.

This dissertation attracted many physicians to go to Paris, to learn from Laënnec and to see the magic instrument. One of them was Magnus Retzius (1795–1871), a Swedish obstetrician, who arrived in Paris to meet with Laënnec to learn how to auscultate with a stethoscope. When he was to leave Paris, Laënnec himself gave him his stethoscope.

In 1826, Laënnec prepared a second extended version of his book [2], but before it was published, Laënnec had already died of tuberculosis.

Later, Retzius, who was a collector of historical medical objects, sold his collection to Carl Mesterton (1826–1889), a famous surgeon and obstetrician in Uppsala. And since then, this stethoscope has been cared for in Uppsala.

“The Stethoscope changed subjective symptoms to objective signs”

In the museum, the story about René Laënnec and his stethoscope will initiate the narrative about physical examination, which is still fundamental to medical diagnosis. According to Sir William Osler (1849–1919), the father of bedside medicine, one of the most important parts of the examination will be listening, listening to the healthy or pathological sounds of the body, and listening to the patient's own story.

This single historical object, Laënnec's own stethoscope, may tell the visitor more than hundreds of modern stethoscopes. And my own strong reaction at first sight, my epiphany, may illustrate the meaning of medical history museums for individual visitors.

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