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NEUROLOGICAL STAMP

René Théophile Hyacinthe Laennec (1781–1826)

The great advance in clinical medicine in the 19th century was the art of diagnosis. René Laennec, pupil of both Bichat and Corvisart, advanced the work of Leopold Auebruger, the inventor of percussion. Auebruger learned from boyhood experiences in his father’s inn that thumping barrels gave different sounds depending on the liquid content. Later he applied this to patients’ chests. Laennec, in his childhood, had watched children listening to the sounds of taps on a hollow log. It was this observation that lead to the invention of the stethoscope and auscultation. In 1816 Laennec was consulted by a young woman with a cardiac condition. Her age and sex inhibited examination by the usual method of placing an ear on the breast—instead, he placed his ear over one end of a tightly rolled sheet of paper, the other end of which he put over the heart. To his surprise, the heartbeat could be heard more clearly than by the direct method; later a hollow, wooden tube was used. With this device and his sensitive musician’s ear (he played the flute), Laennec described audible pulmonary and cardiac lesions and confirmed these with numerous autopsies. The stethoscope, in improved flexible versions, was a major advance in physical diagnosis and rapidly became a standard piece of every doctor’s equipment.

Laennec was appointed to the Chair of Medicine at the College of France at the age of 41 and in the next year succeeded Corvisart as a full professor. Like his other teacher, Bichat, he was a regimental surgeon in the Revolution and an early victim of pulmonary tuberculosis. The publication of his Traité de l’auscultation médité in 1819, and an enlarged second edition in 1823, placed Laennec among the great clinicians. His name in medical terminology is not attached to his great achievement in physical diagnosis, but to the homonymous liver and soft casts expected to occur in bronchial asthma. This French postage stamp was issued in 1952 (Stanley Gibbons 1157, Scott 685).

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