Ambroise Paré, surgery, and obstetrics

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Ambroise Paré (1510–1590) is among the founding fathers of surgery and one of the most luminous figures in the dark period of the late sixteenth century in France (Fig. 1). Amid times torn by wars and religious intolerance, he maintained the ideals of humanism.

A self-taught man, he started learning surgery on the battlefields, as an aide to the count of Laval's private surgeon, then became a surgeon companion at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, before being hired as master barber-surgeon for the duke of Montjean, colonel-general of the infantry. A surgical pioneer, he promoted arterial ligation two centuries before John Hunter, to whom this invention is widely credited. His work on firearm wounds attest of his practical skills acquired on the field and of his sense of observation [1]. His reputation spread after having cured several high-ranking noblemen, and he was appointed first royal surgeon in 1551. In the medical world of his times, he appeared as maverick, not knowing Latin and learning medicine from experience rather than in classical treatises. It required his royal patron's intervention for him to obtain his medical graduation in 1554, initiating the reunion of surgery and medicine which has prevailed to our time. He was unsuccessful however in his attempt to save King Henry II's life, after the latter had sustained a penetrating cerebral wound during a tournament.

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Fig. 1 Ambroise Paré

Although Ambroise Paré's role as a founder of surgery is well acknowledged, his role as a founder of obstetrics is less well known. Human reproduction, until then the *domaine réservé* of midwives and surrounded with ignorance and superstition, was brought by him into the fold with medicine and science. He founded schools

for midwives, elaborated on the training of wet nurses, and his book, *de la génération de l'homme* [2] became the founding block of obstetrics. In this book are depicted several items of interest to pediatric neurosurgeons, such as cephalhematoma as a consequence of forceful labor, and prenatal hydrocephalus (clearly distinguished from macrocephaly) and conjoined twins as causes of dystocia.

His motto *omnia vincit labor improbus* (work overcomes everything), derived from Virgil's Georgics, likened medical research to peasants' labor, and still conveys a message to surgeons of our time.

References

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