Ignaz Semmelweis—Handwashing Invention and COVID-19

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Dear Sir,

I read with interest the article “Ignaz Semmelweis—Father of Hand Hygiene” [1] published in the *Indian Journal of Surgery*. Since the role of handwashing is of paramount importance during this COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to add some additional information about Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, the man who saved millions of lives in the year 1850 with three words—“Wash your hands”. The story of Semmelweis had all the element of a Hollywood epic [2].

“When I look back upon the past, I can only dispel the sadness which fall upon me by gazing into that happy future when the infection will be banished. The conviction that such a time must inevitably sooner than later arrive will cheer my dying hour” wrote Semmelweis in his last days on deathbed while he suffered depression due to continued criticism by medical professionals and colleagues.

He wrote in 1861 in his book “Everything was in question: everything seems inexplicable; everything was doubtful. Only a large number of deaths was an unquestionable reality. It made me so miserable that life seemed worthless”.

Critics of Semmelweis could not accept his ideas of “miniscule and largely invisible amounts of decaying organic matter” as a cause of every childbed fever. Professor Carl Edvard Marius Levy, Head of the Danish Maternity Institute at Copenhagen, wrote “These are my impressions of Dr. Semmelweis’s experiences; for these reasons I must judge provisionally that his opinions are not clear enough and his findings not exact enough to qualify as scientifically founded”. Semmelweis’s superior, Professor Johann Klein, disagreed with the findings of Semmelweis and opposed the concept of hand washing. He said that hospital’s new ventilation system

was transmitting miasma and causing childbed fever. He refused to renew the assistant professorship of Semmelweis. Thus, feeling betrayed, Semmelweis left Vienna abruptly and returned to Budapest.

At a conference of German physicians and natural scientists, most of the speakers rejected the doctrine of Semmelweis including the celebrated Rudolf Virchow from Germany who was the scientist of the highest authority of his time. Virchow’s great authority in medical circles contributed potentially to Semmelweis’s lack of recognition. Semmelweis wrote to one obstetrician in Vienna: “You, Herr Professor, have been a partner in this massacre”. To another he wrote: “Should you, Herr Hofrath, without having disproved my doctrine, continue to train your pupils [against it], I declare before God and the world that you are a murderer and the ‘History of Childbed Fever’ would not be unjust to you if it memorialized you as a medical Nero”. His conduct became increasingly erratic and he was becoming an embarrassment to his colleagues. By 1865, he was drinking heavily, and his behaviour worsened, being described as irrational, odd and inappropriate. He was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease along with perhaps tertiary syphilis. Later that year, he was admitted to a Viennese insane asylum. He was only an inpatient for 2 weeks but during that time, he endured severe beating, was secured in a straitjacket, doused with cold water and administered castor oil as laxative. He died on August 13, 1865, due to sepsis from a gangrenous wound in his right hand that was probably caused by one of the beatings he endured. The irony was that his cause of death was given as pyaemia. He received no recognition in his own lifetime for his outstanding work on hand washing which brought down significantly the maternal mortality rate by preventing disease transmission. He was a martyr in his lifetime and later a hero—the “Saviour of mothers” [3].

“Semmelweis Reflex—The tendency to reject new evidence or new knowledge because it contradicts established norms, benefits and paradigms”.

Robert Anton Wilson.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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