



Semmelweis, the unsung

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Context:

Ignaz Semmelweis (July 1, 1818 – August 13, 1865) was a Hungarian physician who was deeply misunderstood, and was shunned and ostracized by his peers. He believed that handwashing, a simple and straightforward procedure, was the key to reducing deaths in mothers and infants caused by nosocomial infections. His vision for the medical field - integrating handwashing into medical practitioners' standard operating procedures - was viewed as blasphemy. Even though it was shown to be highly effective, his method of handwashing was never accepted by the majority of his peers, owing to their contempt for the notion that they could be responsible for puerperal sepsis, and likely also due to Semmelweis's inability to communicate a compelling theoretical explanation. Though his faith never wavered, the lack of support and belief did

cause great mental distress, and he died in a mental asylum.

Decades later, it is thanks to his discovery that we now have proper measures in place to reduce the risks of healthcare providers spreading pathogenic particles to their patients. Semmelweis didn't just leave behind his handwashing methods, he left us a legacy - his steadfastness, passion and unwavering resolution are qualities that all medical practitioners should possess. Semmelweis's willingness to go against the norm, in order to deliver the best healthcare for his patients, is worth emulating. No one is perfect, however, and Semmelweis's 'fatal' flaw was his shortcoming in communicating his findings and advocating for change. His ordeal highlights the significance of effective communication in the medical field. This poem is an ode to Semmelweis.

As the bell tolls,
another newborn angel falls.
Promise of what could have been,
now only heartbreak can be seen.

Screams, pain, death.
Panic, fear, chaos.
Life given by the hands of God,
or has the devil unsheathed its ugly claws?

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Perched in the highest echelons,
guardians in white.
Pure were thought these sons,
blessed with the gift to cure.

From autopsy table to birthing suite,
defiled their hands became;
tarnished by invisible death,
pure no more the guardians were.

Then a saviour did arrive -
Serendipity or Science.
A concoction brewed from chlorine and lime,
restored purity that once had been.

But no cheers for him who gifted,
even as life blossomed in his light.
Mysteries stayed shrouded in ignorant mists,
even as the stars shone brighter at night.

Abandoned, betrayed was he,
crucified as a contemptible scapegoat.
Enlightenment too great to perceive,
liberty stripped, knife to throat.

Unsung saviour lost at sea,
mind ravaged by ridicule, rejection,
body battered, soul exorcised,
doomed by resentment, destined to not be.

Duplet decennium*, riddle resolved,
bone and ash immortalised in stone.
Chronicle rewritten, abhorrence abrogated,
millennia of life in exchange for his own.

*Duplet decennium - two decades later