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History of Medicine is a course taken by every first year medical student at New York Medical College. It is taught by the chancellor, Dr. Edward C. Halperin. The course begins by exploring medicine practiced by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, and delves into major medical innovations. Students also learn of controversial events that have occurred throughout medical history, including physicians' role in the slave trade and discrimination against medical school applicants of Jewish descent. As a final project, History of Medicine requires students to write a paper on a historical medical figure. The following is Bailey Fitzgerald's account of the life of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes:

I chose to write about Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. because I loved that his genius spread tentacles out of the field of medicine into writing, poetry, and policy. In my undergraduate education, I studied both English and Biochemistry. I have always been passionate about literature, so it felt important to me to have some balance built into my curriculum even into medical school. Most of the time, when people find out about my dual degrees, the reaction I encounter is surprise. It is not that people do not see how I could like both, but it seems generally counter-culture to give equal weight to a humanities subject and a hard science. However, to me, not only does the concept make perfect sense, I cannot imagine having one without the other. In medicine, we are the progeny of a long line of physician scientists who were also consummate humanists. Thus, I chose to write about Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. because I love his writing.

"Boston State-House is the hub of the solar system. You couldn't pry that out of a Boston man, if you had the tire of all creation straightened out for a crowbar."¹

"[A] Boston man" Oliver Wendell Holmes most certainly was. He was very arguably born that way, and if he was not, by the time he penned those lines in 1857 he had become the consummate Bostonian, the toast of Boston medical societies and literary societies alike. It seems unlikely that Holmes truly believed, in the most objective sense, that Boston really was "the hub of the solar system" when he inserted the line into the mouth of a character from his most famous work, "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table". The United States that Holmes lived in was becoming increasingly cognizant of a wider world, a shift away from the colonial centers of Boston to the more and more prominently problematic South and ever-expanding West. It seemed that the future of the United States would lie in the expanding western border and the addictive promise of a manifest destiny, fueled by technological innovation. For the first time, railroads were surpassing canals, and in the year Holmes published the collection, "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table", Minnesota was admitted to the Union. But as the Union was expanding, it was also tenu-

ous. Kansas was precipitously dissolved into conflicts between its pro and anti-slavery citizens known collectively as "Bleeding Kansas", ominously foreshadowing the civil war to follow. The newspapers announcing the (in)famous Supreme court decision of Dred Scott v. Sandford circulated contemporary to the first issues of Holmes' magazine, *Atlantic Monthly*.²

For Holmes, however, controversy reached him only when it reached the heart of Boston. Boston was by all accounts, in both practice and feeling, the center of Holmes' solar system.³ He was in many ways the embodiment of isolated privilege within the turbulent context. The circumstances of his birth and career both led him to be so ensconced in the embrace of the oldest and highest Boston society as to be widely credited with neologizing the concept of the Boston "Brahmin Caste".^{†,3} His family was an old, moneyed, and eminently respectable one. He was born on the 29th of August 1809 to a minister of the First Church, the Reverend Abiel Holmes, and to Sarah Wendell Holmes, whose merchant family could be proudly traced to the earliest settlers of Boston⁴. His childhood home and birthplace in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the furthest place from the center of Boston that Holmes ever meaningfully called home.³

Education played an important and well-emphasized role in Holmes' upbringing. He studied at the Phillips Academy in Andover as preparation for entering Harvard, where he matriculated in 1829. Ironically, Holmes did not intend to study medicine, and actually studied law for a year before switching to a course of medical studies. In furtherance of his medical education, Holmes embarked for Paris in 1833, where he studied under a number of illustrious physicians including Pierre Louis (who was in turn a student of René Laennec).⁴ While in Paris, Holmes was an attentive student, writing home that he spent more than "five hours in the day... at the bedside of patients," and that such time was always spent, "with my note-book in my hand".⁵ However, the biggest influence of Louis on the education of the young Holmes was not the hours spent in learning clinical skills in the hospital, but rather the hours spent outside the hospital where, under the mentorship of Louis, Holmes became a member of the Société d'Observation Médicale.

There, Holmes was encouraged to undergo a "laborious examination of all the organs of the body in such cases as are

[†] It is perhaps worth noting that Holmes' concept of these New England "Brahmins", referring to those lineages of educated professionals and prominent officials, was opposed to those from "the huckleberry districts", a rather snotty turn of phrase that managed to imply innocent geography while insinuating inferiority. This was an era where the virtue inherent to an elevated class was both keenly felt and continuously asserted. As for Holmes, "[h]is own social position was as secure as a German who has a 'von' before his name".³

fatal” and to examine thoroughly the facts of every case, looking for similarities between groups of cases while scrupulously documenting the effects of treatment.⁵ While seemingly routine to a modern reader, this orderly emphasis on databases of carefully garnered facts within a medical community constituted the beginnings of the modern concept of evidence-based medicine.

When Holmes returned home to Boston, he sat for his exams and was granted his M.D. from Harvard in 1836. Diploma in hand, the twenty-six-year-old Holmes was unleashed upon the medical societies of Boston, by all accounts raring to implement all that he had learned in Paris at his practice in Boston, and thus becoming one of Boston’s most prominent physicians.⁵ To this end, Holmes wrote for (and won) three consecutive prizes in the prestigious Harvard Boylston Dissertation competition.^{‡, §}

Although initially embarked on a course of private practice, the focus of Holmes’ medical career quickly shifted toward teaching. Over the next twenty years, Holmes held teaching positions at Dartmouth College (to which he commuted fourteen weeks out of the year) and at Tremont Street Medical College, a school he helped establish in Boston. He also edited a version of Hall’s *The Theory and Practice of Medicine*. However, the inspiration for Holmes’ next, and most famous, contribution to medical reform came during his tenure on the staff of the Boston Dispensary, to which he was appointed in 1837.⁴

While on staff at the dispensary, Holmes helped found a society known as the Boston Society for Medical Improvement. Through reports at society meetings and his own observations at the dispensary, Holmes began to notice patterns of puerperal fever concentrated in particular obstetric practices and was particularly struck by an anecdote of a physician who had died after sustaining a cut while performing an autopsy on a woman who had died of the disease. Curious, Holmes decided to examine available medical literature and to investigate the causes of this disease pattern.⁴

On February 13, 1843, Holmes presented his essay on puerperal fever to the members of the Boston Society for Medical Improvement. Combining his considerable scientific intellect, his learned talent for survey of evidence, and his gifted literary skills, the essay was a damning report that argued that the transmission of puerperal fever was actually accomplished by the physicians assisting in the deliveries. Holmes

‡ Interestingly, at this time, the world record for most Boylston Prizes ever won by an individual was the 4 consecutive prizes that had been won by Holmes’ brother-in-law, Dr. Usher Parsons⁵.

§ One of the prizes, which he split with two other authors, was written in response to the query, “How far are the external means of exploring this conditions of the internal organs to be considered useful and important in medical practice?” Here, Holmes submitted an impassioned treatise advocating for the expanded use of the stethoscope in United States clinical practice. This advocacy appears to be a manifestation of his Parisian training, and of the influence of René Laennec as an intellectual grandfather of sorts¹⁰.

called for a reform of the protocols involved in dealing with this disease. He cautioned that a “physician holding himself in readiness to attend cases of midwifery, should never take any active part in the post-mortem examination of cases of puerperal fever” and that “if within a short period two cases of puerperal fever happen close to each other... [the physician attending the cases] would do wisely to relinquish his obstetrical practice for at least one month, and endeavor to free himself by every available means from any noxious influence he may carry about him.” What made these observations and recommendations truly prescient was that they were made six years before the famous studies by Ignaz Semmelweis on the subject and well before Lister’s work in antisepsis was broadcasted.⁴

His work proved a zeitgeist for the popularization of sanitary medical practices in the United States, but not for a number of years after it was published. It was in fact, a ridicule of the work published by several obstetricians, Hugh Hodge and Charles Meigs, that revived the paper. Their opposition to Holmes’ conclusion(s) spawned a republishing of the work, which gained a much wider audience in 1855 than the original publication ever had. When the work of Pasteur and Lister was popularized in the 1860s and 70s, Holmes was vindicated.^{‡, 4}

In 1847, Holmes joined the faculty of Harvard Medical School where he served as a professor of anatomy and physiology for the next thirty-five years. For the first six of these, he served as a dean of the Harvard Medical Faculty.⁴ It was during his tenure as dean that the turmoil of the outside world first began to encroach into Holmes’ Boston medical sphere. In the area of slavery and civil rights, Holmes seemingly displayed what might fairly be characterized as a remarkable ambivalence. In 1850, Martin Delaney^{**} and two other young African American men applied to join the incoming medical class, and Holmes admitted the students. However, after the student body registered a number of protests, Holmes asked the students to leave the college a year later.^{††, 6}

This stringent policy of appeasement in Holmes’ public views did not go unremarked upon by his friends. Holmes explained himself to his friend James Russell Lowell, who charged Holmes with not taking a properly reformist role in response to issues such as slavery. Holmes responded that although he could not deny the heroism of soldiers, his growing distaste for war made him unable to support any cause that seemed likely to lead to it. “Slavery,” in the mind of Holmes, “yielded...to the danger of disunion, and he desired to avert

¶ Holmes is reported to have described the paper as the “most significant contribution of his life.”⁴

** Despite this setback, Martin Delaney would later become one of the nation’s foremost African nationalists. Undaunted, upon his return home, Mr. Delaney styled himself and began some level of medical practice.

†† Holmes was seemingly equally non-committal on the controversial issue of admitting women to the practice of medicine. When pressed on the subject, he allowed that he “was willing to teach women anatomy, but not in the same classes or dissecting rooms as men.”⁴



the catastrophe of civil war".^{‡‡,7}

After his tenure as dean, Holmes dedicated his time to literary pursuits for which he is at least as equally well remembered as for his medical insights. He became a founding member of the magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*, for which he contributed a series of 'breakfast table' articles, the most famous of which is his "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table", one of the magazine's inaugural pieces. Holmes' literary canon, including articles, books, papers, and poems have earned him a lasting place of honor among the classics of American literature. The Saturday Club, of which he was a founding member as well, (it was created to support *The Atlantic Monthly*), counted among its exclusive ranks such notables as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow.⁴

In 1882, Holmes finally retired from teaching and once again left Boston to visit Europe, this time not as a student but as a famous scientist and well-respected elder of the profession. On this second Grand Tour, Holmes was awarded honorary degrees by the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh. In his advancing years, Holmes lived in Boston with his daughter and then his son, the often overshadowing Justice of the United States Supreme Court. It was there that he died, at the age of 85 on October 7th, 1894.⁴

The true legacy of Holmes lies not merely in his literature, or his famous offspring, or even his essay on puerperal fever. In the essay, "Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science," Holmes wrote:

*The truth is, that medicine, professedly founded on observation, is as sensitive to outside influences, political, religious, philosophical, imaginative, as is the barometer to the changes of atmospheric density. But look a moment while I clash a few facts together, and see if some sparks do not reveal by their light a closer relation between the medical sciences and the conditions of society and the general thought of time, than would, at first, be suspected.*⁸

He goes on to elaborate that, in his time, the true context shaping the scientific inquiry of the time was that of reform and a rejection of traditional practices in favor of soundly researched evidence-based approaches. Holmes notes that, in his time, "the more positive knowledge we gain, the more we incline to question all that has been received without absolute proof."⁸ In Holmes, medicine received an articulate, dogged, and extremely knowledgeable advocate for what Neuhauser calls "The Logic of Medicine".⁹ Holmes' logical prescription of treatment based on facts alone, accrued through a community of evidence-based societies of clinicians, is the tradition of modern medicine in which physicians are still taught, and in which they still practice today.

^{‡‡} Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (Holmes' son, and later Justice of the United States Supreme Court) and Amelia Jackson Holmes (Dr. Holmes' wife) had no such compunctions when it came to slavery as *casus belli*. Both Dr. Holmes' wife and son had an early interest in the abolitionist movement, and his son later joined the Army and served as a union soldier in the Civil War.¹¹

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