

Comment on Semmelweis Editorial



TO THE EDITORS: Semmelweis (SW) merited your editorial and his place on the list of memorable obstetricians.¹

He was not aware of the work of Alexander Gordon (AG) and Oliver Wendell Holmes (OWH), who had earlier contributed hugely to the understanding and management of “childbed fever.”

AG published his treatise 2 decades before SW’s birth.² AG’s work was ably described by Thoms in “Gordon of Aberdeen”² and was the inspiration for a fictional account: “Touching Distance” by Rebecca Abrams.

OWH published a history of childbed fever with recommendations about its containment in 1843 in *The New England Quarterly Journal of Medicine and Surgery*. This was included in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*’s “Classic Pages in Obstetrics and Gynecology” in 1974.³ It concluded with 8 recommendations, largely based on AG’s findings, covering most of SW’s insights.

AG’s and OWH’s work predated SW’s “Damascene moment” with the death of Kolletschka in 1847. They should be as well-remembered as SW, and a narrative about him without mention of them would be as incomplete and wan as Punch and Judy without Punch. ■

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The author has no conflict of interest to report.

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REPLY



We thank Dr McFarlane for his comments on our article.¹ We are aware of Gordon’s and Holmes’s work, but disagree that it would have been appropriate to mention their work in a tribute to Semmelweis on the bicentennial of his birth, or that their contributions can begin to be compared to Semmelweis’s, as other have already noted.

For example, after comparing Holmes’s and Semmelweis’s contributions, Busby and Rodin concluded:

“The scope and depth of his treatise, his teaching, and his devotion to the practice of obstetrics had all combined to give Semmelweis an unassailable place in history as the discoverer of the ‘etiology, concept, and prophylaxis of puerperal fever. Holmes’s work has been granted the recognition it deserves.”²

Like Holmes, Gordon made astute observations, but like Holmes he stopped at observation, and neither he nor Holmes had what Professor Waangensteen has called “a unique example of a penetrating insight without parallel in the history of medicine.”³ But the gulf that separates the contributions of Semmelweis and others, like Holmes and Gordon, was best explained by Professor Codell Carter:

“Semmelweis employed a strategy that was later fundamental to many important developments in medicine; his use of that strategy connects his work with modern medicine and makes him a contributor to our current research tradition in a way that the others simply were not...Recognizing his method is absolutely essential to appreciating his place in the history of medicine, and so far as I can determine, his most important methodological contributions have been totally ignored in the numerous discussions of his work.”⁴ ■

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The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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