

Rediscovering Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis: some additional thoughts



TO THE EDITORS: I read with genuine enthusiasm the recent comprehensive review of the life and work of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis—clearly one of the greatest of all obstetricians—and *AJOG* should be commended for realizing the importance of publishing and thus promoting this important work on a monumental chapter in obstetrical history.¹ Over nearly 30 years of practice, I have lectured extensively about Semmelweis and his keen, serendipitous observations, which revolutionized our understanding of obstetrical infection and its prevention and the importance of clinical research. Although conducted in the 19th century, the work of Dr Semmelweis provides contemporary perspective not only on the topic of maternal mortality, but in also serving to remind us that a closed-minded medical community can be a dangerous thing when it comes to the potential benefits of new ideas and innovations. I would only point out that this otherwise excellent paper by Nicholas Kadar concludes with what I felt was an unfortunate tirade of criticism for the late Dr Sherwin Nuland (1930–2014), who wrote and lectured extensively about Dr Semmelweis.² By rough count, Dr Kadar saw fit to refer to Dr Nuland by name 33 times, each in a negative light. Sadly, Dr Nuland died from prostate cancer several years ago and is unable to defend his widely sold and, in my opinion, excellent book on Semmelweis. Dr Nuland, who changed his birth name as a young man from Shepsel Nudelman to escape rampant anti-Semitism, received his medical degree from Yale in 1955. He became chief surgical resident at Yale–New Haven Hospital, and from 1962 until 1991 was clinical professor of surgery at Yale, where he also taught bioethics and medical history (despite the authors' statement that "Nuland was a surgeon, not a medical historian"). When he retired he wrote numerous medically related books, including *Doctors: The Biography of Medicine* (1988), *The Wisdom of the Body* (1997), *The Doctors' Plague* (2004), and *The Uncertain Art* (2008). His 1994 book, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*, was a *New York Times* best seller and won the National Book Award for nonfiction, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. In 2005, Nuland propelled his interest and expertise in medical history into a highly regarded series of lectures for the Teaching Company's "The Great Courses" on the history of Western medicine, titled "Doctors: The History of Scientific Medicine Revealed Through Biography." I write this not to dismiss Dr Kadar's thoroughly researched and well written review, but simply to note that I doubt strongly that Nuland would simply create a revisionist myth of the life of Semmelweis as the author implies, but more reasonably saw similar information differently; it is history after all. Dr Kadar's review would have been

made richer by treating a historical reviewer of Semmelweis with greater deference, and perhaps with a touch of admiration for the early work Nuland did to bring this giant of obstetrics to our modern literature. If it were not for Nuland's book on Semmelweis, I would not have first become enthralled with the wonders and lessons of medical history. ■

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2. Nuland SB. *The doctors' plague: germs, childbed fever, and the strange story of Ignaz Semmelweis*. New York and London: W.W. Norton Publishers; 2004.

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REPLY



I thank Dr Perlow for his interest in my article,¹ and I welcome the opportunity to amplify my statements about what Dr Sherwin Nuland has written about Semmelweis, and to update my account of Semmelweis's prophylaxis with the information I was able to glean from a French article by Friedrich Wiegner, an eyewitness to how the prophylaxis was practiced, that Dr Russell Croft has translated for me since my manuscript was submitted.² Wiegner added the following to the chlorine hand-disinfection, which strikes me as a crucial omission from the Semmelweis historiography:

"It is above all essential to brush the nails and the skin folds surrounding the nails with the most scrupulous care. This is the whole secret."²

I regret that Dr. Nuland has passed away, as I would dearly have wished openly to debate with him the many things he has written about Semmelweis that are not true, as this would be the most effective way to correct them. However, I take