

## The Doctors' Plague

*Germ, Childbed Fever, and the Strange Story of Ignác Semmelweis*

SHERWIN B. NULAND

Norton, \$21.95 cloth, ISBN 0-393-05299-0

Even with tremendous advances in medicine in recent decades, as consumers we are still constantly reminded of a simple, low-tech medical procedure: Wash your hands. Our mothers made sure this lesson was learned, but it's not a folk remedy. Especially in these flu-ish times, the most common and effective measure against the spread of influenza hinges on this tried-and-true method. However, the history of medicine emphasizes that this commonsense action was not always common and, in fact, once marked the exception rather than the rule—for both physicians and consumers.

Ignác Semmelweis, a Viennese doctor active in the mid-1800s, is widely credited as being one of the “fathers” of modern hygienic practices in hospitals—especially the routine practice of hand-washing with disinfectants by doctors and nurses. Semmelweis developed a unique passion for this necessary act while delivering babies. Through the mid-1800s, highly infectious diseases were major killers of mothers and newborns, particularly in the pathogen-rich atmosphere of hospitals. Semmelweis observed a clear path between these invisible invaders and the rapid demise of women who birthed while attended by medical staff who had rushed from one delivery to another without using any sanitary measures. This was ultimately found to be the cause of “childbed fever.” With the adoption of standardized hand-washing procedures, mortality was greatly reduced, introducing a modern era in medical practice.

Sherwin Nuland's fascinating examination of Semmelweis and the environment in which he worked finds compelling evidence to suggest his subject was not only not alone in this pioneering effort, he was not its originator. And though he was deserving of credit, Semmelweis' autocratic methods and gruff behavior may have had as much to do with slowing this medical revolution as creating it. A history well worth reexamining. ■

## The Cambridge Historical Dictionary of Disease

Edited by KENNETH F. KIPPLE

Cambridge University, \$27.00 cloth, ISBN 0-521-80834-0

Covering everything from AIDS to Yellow Fever, this is one of the best resources available for background and perspective on the diseases that afflict human beings. Not every disease is included, but we find 161 of the most significant ones (some entries cover multiple, related conditions), both those that are on the public mind today and those that ran rampant in the past. AIDS, hypertension, and osteoarthritis are examples of the former; leprosy, rickets, and smallpox typify the latter. Each entry begins with a concise definition of the disease and the conditions associated with it, followed by the history associated with its observation and classification. In many cases, this includes the etymology of the disease name—rickets, for example, was first termed in 1634, even though it was documented long before, and was first called rachitis (from the Greek word for “spine”) by Francis Glisson (1597-1677), an English doctor.

As the book's title aptly suggests, the entries are heavy on history: the key people involved in identifying each ailment, controversies, the evolution of treatments, and an objective perspective on the roles most of these conditions posed—and, or pose today—within population groups and human cultures. Although this historical emphasis is the key structure behind the title, the care with which this background is presented and the accompanying perspective provide invaluable understanding of the impact on individuals and societies in today's disease-sensitive world. Worth keeping close by for handy reference. ■

REVIEWER: **Kim Long** is a contributing editor to *TBR*.