

Scurvy Mystery Reveals

Arrogance of Medicine

We love evidence-
based medicine
(EBM). But common

sense is also
important. Has
arrogance in
medicine replaced
experience and
observation?





Older doctor with fingers in
ears displays arrogance of
medicine

Physicians have been
respected for
thousands of years.

That's because people

who are suffering look to healers for comfort. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, suggested an “oath” for medical students. Around 430 BCE he wrote: “I will use those dietary regimens which

will benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgement, and I will do no harm or injustice to them.” Sadly, not all doctors have followed his precepts. As a result, an arrogance of

medicine has persisted
for hundreds of years.
One example is how
doctors bungled the
diagnosis and
treatment of scurvy.

Scurvy and the Arrogance of Medicine:

According to his book,
“*What’s Gotten Into*
You,” Dan Levitt notes
that scurvy was a
scourge. It killed
approximately two
million sailors in the
three centuries

between 1500 and
1800.

Long voyages often
took a tremendous toll.
Sailors became weak
and irritable. They
developed joint pain,
bleeding gums and

bruises. Their swollen gums could not hold on to teeth, which often fell out.

Old scars would open up and start to bleed, while new wounds failed to heal. By the

18th century, a captain
on a long voyage might
lose half his crew to
scurvy.

**Ignoring
the**

Evidence:

It didn't have to
happen. That's
because the cure had
been discovered more
than a century earlier.
In 1617 a textbook for

ships' doctors
recommended daily
doses of lemon juice.

**Dan Levitt
summarized
this
knowledge in**

his article in Popular Science (Jan. 26, 2023):

“The writer Stephen
Bown observes that

in the seventeenth century, captains made mad dashes from port to port in an attempt to outrun the disease. It was also known that lemon juice could prevent or cure it. In

his 1617
textbook, *The
Surgeon's Mate*,
John Woodall
recommended
lemon juice daily.
The Dutch East
India Company
even established

plantations in the
Cape of Good Hope
and Mauritius to
provide lemons for
their crews.

“Over time,
unfortunately, the
knowledge of lemon

juice's beneficial properties somehow vanished. The reasons were many, including simple complacency. When the incidence of scurvy grew worse again, there was

resistance to citrus.
Lemon juice was
expensive and
some shipowners
suspected that
merchants touted
the imaginary
medicinal powers of
lemons just to drive

up the price. At the same time, physicians were peddling a confusing variety of many other supposed cures. As author David Harvie observes, there

were even “anti-fruiters,” who claimed that lemons hurt rather than helped sailors on some expeditions.”

The Arrogance of Medicine Delayed

Effective Treatment:

It wasn't until 1747 that
ship surgeon James
Lind performed a small
and complicated
experiment. He got

permission to treat 12 sailors who were sick with scurvy. Modern medicine would laugh at such a small, short and seemingly silly “study.”

According to Levitt,
Lind tried seawater,
cider, vinegar, sulfuric
acid, citrus fruit and a
mystery mixture of
garlic and radish root
with some other herbal
products. Only two
people tested each

remedy, and the trial
lasted only a week.

The Lemons Won!

At that point, the ship
ran out of lemons and

oranges. But during that week, the duo getting citrus fruit recovered, while the others just got sicker.

It took Lind a long time to write up his findings, which he published in

1753. The British Navy was even slower, though. More than 100,000 men died of scurvy between 1756 and 1763, during the Seven Years' War.

Scurvy continued to cripple crews during a cross-Atlantic altercation in the late 1770s that we call the American Revolution. Would the British Navy have prevailed if it had paid attention to Lind?

In 1795, the Navy
finally began providing
sailors with lemon
juice. Read more about
scurvy and other
fascinating medical
discoveries in Dan
Levitt's book, *What's
Gotten Into You.*

Clinical Experience vs. “Evidence-

Based Medicine”

There was a time, not
that long ago, when
physicians trusted their
clinical experience.
They made mistakes,

to be sure. Sticking an icepick into the eye socket to sever neuronal connections in the brain was barbaric. “Frontal lobotomies” were supposed to “cure” forms of mental illness

such as schizophrenia.
Instead, it left many
patients in a vegetative
state.

The arrogance of
medicine allowed this
barbaric “surgery” to
persist for far too long.

Tens of thousands of
patients were
lobotomized during the
1940s and 1950s.

Discovering Diseases

and Treatments Through Observation:

Despite the disasters,
many physicians
discovered new
diseases and
treatments through
careful observation.
These days, though,
doctors
are *not* supposed to

rely upon experience.
Instead, we live in the
age of “evidence-
based medicine” and
guidelines.

That means
randomized clinical
trials and

recommendations from
thought leaders based
on data. We are
enthusiastic about
evidence, but we also
appreciate careful
observation and
experience.

Another physician,
Ignaz Semmelweis,
made an important
observation during the
mid-19th century. He
noted that the
maternity ward staffed
by midwives had a
much lower maternal

mortality rate than the one staffed by doctors. Medical students often had their hands in cadavers in the anatomy labs, which were close to the maternity ward.

The Hand Washing Experiment:

After considering other
possibilities, Dr.
Semmelweis ordered

the medical staff to
wash their hands and
instruments with a
strong chlorine
disinfectant. As a
result, maternal
mortality plummeted.

You might think that the results of this “experiment” would have been celebrated by the medical community. Even more important, you would assume that the colleagues of Dr.

Semmelweis would
have embraced his
idea of hand washing
before delivering
babies.

Once again, the
arrogance of medicine
reared its ugly head.

This thoughtful physician was ridiculed. His research was rejected, and he ended up in an insane asylum. You can read more about this sad chapter in the history of medicine [at this link.](https://www.peoplespharmacy.com/articles/scurvy-mystery-reveals-arrogance-of-medicine)

Modern Day Arrogance in Medicine:

More than a decade
ago the British health
service (NHS)
discouraged long-
sleeve white coats,
jewelry and ties.

CBS news reported on September 17, 2007:

“Ties are rarely
laundered but worn

daily,' the
Department of
Health said in a
statement. 'They
perform no
beneficial function in
patient care and
have been shown to

be colonized by
pathogens.'

“The new
regulations would
mean an end to
doctors’ traditional
white coats, Health
Secretary Alan

Johnson said. Fake nails, jewelry and watches, which the department warned could harbor germs, are also out.

“Johnson said the ‘bare below the

elbows' dress code
would help prevent
the spread of
Methicillin-resistant
Staphylococcus
aureus, or MRSA,
the deadly bacteria
resistant to nearly

every available
antibiotic.”

The Arrogance

of Medicine in America Rejected

That Idea:

To this day, most
hospitals in the US
have not implemented
a **“bare below the
elbows”** dress code.

**The Harvard
T.H. Chan
School of
Public Health
shared this
perspective in
its 2019 News:**

“While the doctor’s
white coat may
symbolize the
profession of
medicine, it may
also be harboring
bacteria and

pathogens, studies
have found.

“In an April 29,
2019 *New York*
Times article, Austin
Frakt, adjunct
associate professor
in the Department of

Health Policy and
Management at
Harvard T.H. Chan
School of Public
Health, described
research that found
harmful bacteria on
doctors' white coats,
on their ties, and on

stethoscopes,
phones, and tablets
that they use.

“For instance, a
systematic review
found that as many
as 16% of white
coats tested positive

for methicillin-
resistant
Staphylococcus
aureus (MRSA),
and up to 42% for
the bacterial class
Gram-negative
rods. Both types of
bacteria can cause

serious health
problems, such as
skin and
bloodstream
infections, sepsis,
and pneumonia.
Another study, of
orthopedic
surgeons, found a

45% match between
the types of bacteria
found on their ties
and in the wounds
of patients they'd
treated.”

You can read more
about this controversy
in our article at this
link:

“Doctors Resist
Removing White
Coats and Ties”

**Have We
Learned
Anything
in 300
Years?**

Drs. Lind and Semmelweis both conducted their experiments a long time ago because they had observed things that their colleagues ignored. Perhaps it is time for modern-day

researchers to
recognize the value of
experience as well as
experiments.

We would also like to
see all hospitals and
clinics supplying their
staffs with clean or

disposable outer wear.

We think health
professionals should
change out of their
street clothes and into
clean clothes before
they start seeing and
touching patients.

What do you think? Is there still arrogance of medicine? Have you had a disappointing experience with a health professional who did not listen to you? Please share your story in the

comment section
below. And if you
would like to protect
yourself or someone
you love from this kind
of behavior, check out
our book, Top
Screwups at this link.