

HISTORY OF HANDWASHING

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Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818-1865)

ON the momentous day of 15 May 1850, in the lecture hall of the Vienna Medical Society, Hungarian physician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis stepped up to make an announcement. Before this, many groundbreaking discoveries in medicine were announced from this hall. But this time, Semmelweis wanted to share a very important piece of advice with his doctor colleagues, which contained just three words: Wash your hands!

During the COVID-19 pandemic, everybody was also advised to wash their hands with water and soap or sanitise them using an alcohol-based sanitiser. We are now fully aware of the infection caused by bacteria and viruses, thanks to Louis Pasteur for the “Germ’s Theory of Disease” he developed in the nineteenth century. Doctors wash their hands before examining a patient or carrying out an operation to prevent the spread

of infection. However, surprisingly, the physicians did not realise the lifesaving power of this simple act until 1847. Strange as it might sound today, it was a fact of the day. Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, the physician, introduced the practice of handwashing to physicians.

Semmelweis was born on 1 July 1818 in the Castle district of Buda in a German-born bourgeois family. He was the fifth of the ten children born in the family. His father, Josef Semmelweis, an ethnic German, was a wholesale businessman of spices and commercial goods. His mother, Teresia Muller, was the daughter of a coach builder. The house where Semmelweis was born still stands today as the Semmelweis Medical History Museum. When Semmelweis was born, Buda was an independent country. In 1837, it combined with Pest to form Budapest.

Interestingly, it is quite telling of the type of life in Buda at that time, as seven out of the ten family children had different surnames entered in their birth certificates. Semmelweis’s name was entered as Semalvais in his birth certificate, and those of his six siblings, “w” and double “m,” were not part of any of the surnames. As a wealthy businessman, his father earned enough money to educate and bring up his ten children with dignity.

The medium of conversation of Semmelweis at home was German instead of Hungarian. As a child, he went to the royal Catholic Gymnasium of Buda. He was a distinguished student, especially proficient in his Hungarian language skills. He was nice, talented and a good athlete.



Teresia Muller and Josef Semmelweis, the parents of Ignaz Semmelweis

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