

Oliver Wendell Holmes Biography

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Biography

Best known as a poet and essayist, Oliver Wendell Holmes was also a renowned physician. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Holmes came from an old New England family. He earned both his undergraduate and medical degrees from Harvard, then served as professor of anatomy at Dartmouth from 1838-1840 and at Harvard from 1847 until his retirement in 1882. His ability to hold his students' attention was legendary. During these years, he wrote medical papers, literary essays, and poems, including the famous "Old Ironsides" and "The Deacon's Masterpiece." He also suggested the name anesthesia for the use of ether in surgery when it began in 1846.

During 1842 and 1843 the medical community of Boston was especially concerned about puerperal **fever**, or childbed fever. This dreaded and usually fatal contagion regularly swept through maternity wards of hospitals, striking women who had just given birth. Holmes did a study of cases of the fever and presented his findings in *The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever*, published in 1843 and reprinted with additions in 1855. He deduced that the disease was a contagious infection carried from dead or infected patients to new victims by the doctors who examined them. Holmes recommended hand washing and other sanitary precautions by physicians to prevent the spread of the disease. This discovery preceded similar findings by Ignaz Semmelweiss four years later.

Unfortunately, Holmes's advice was largely ignored or attacked by his colleagues, especially since microbiological proof of the theory was unavailable. But Holmes, unlike Semmelweiss, did live to see his conclusions proven and put into practice.