
ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS

Laënnec's 1819 Stethoscope



An asthmatic “consumptive” with a keen sense of musical pitch, French physician René Théophile Hyacinthe Laënnec (1781–1826) enjoyed watching children play near the Louvre as they listened to the scratching of pins from the opposite end of a long stick. To think that such play would later inspire Laënnec (by 1816) to invent the stethoscope! Both a flautist and a woodturner, Laënnec soon found himself turning walnut-wood cylinders into shorter, wider versions of flutes *sans* finger holes—stethoscopes. Finally, physicians could abandon direct “ear-on-chest” auscultation in favor of the stethoscope, an innovation which preserved (particularly female) patients’ modesty and physicians’ professional distance. In 1819 Laënnec handcrafted a stethoscope (*see above, courtesy of the Wood Library-Museum*) for a Strasbourg colleague. That Laënnec creation was acquired by telephone auction in 1991 by a quick-dialing curator. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc. This image appears in color in the *Anesthesiology Reflections* online collection available at www.anesthesiology.org.)

George S. Bause, M.D., M.P.H., Honorary Curator, ASA’s Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology, Park Ridge, Illinois, and Clinical Associate Professor, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. UJYC@aol.com.