

Father of Hand Washing

Hungarian obstetrician **Ignac Semmelweis (1818–1865)** was one of the earliest clinical investigators of modern medical science. In nineteenth century Europe, puerperal fever (childbed fever) was a major clinical and public health problem with very high maternal mortality. It was thought to be caused by miasma, epidemicity, or the Will of Providence. Apart from bloodletting, there was no cure for it. Semmelweis cared for the childbed fever women during their illness, and when they died, he did autopsies on them. Astute clinical observations and logical reasoning goaded Semmelweis to suspect the role of “unholy” hands of “holy” physicians in the transmission of puerperal fever. He enforced a hand-washing policy for physicians. Those with unwashed hands were disallowed into labor room. The hand-washing practice for 1 year led to unprecedented decrease in maternal mortality. It enabled Semmelweis to establish a strong, specific, temporal causal association between unclean hands and puerperal fever. Although not accepted during his lifetime, this causal hypothesis contributed significantly to the understanding of etiopathophysiology of not only puerperal fever but also many other communicable diseases. Clinical hand washing, since then, has prevented millions of deaths of humankind.

In the present times too, his idea of hand hygiene plays a central role in COVID-19 pandemic management. Authors present a brief account of life and work of this maverick genius, who was born “too early in the darkness.” He is also called the “Father of infection control” and “Savior of mothers.”

