

We all know that it is a good idea to wash your hands, but did you ever think to ask why this exercise came into practice?

Ignaz Semmelweis (Figure 0.1.1) was a doctor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. There, doctors frequently practiced with cadavers before delivering babies in the maternity ward (Figure 0.1.2).

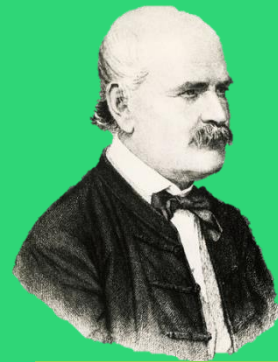


Fig. 0.1.1 Ignaz Semmelweis



Fig. 0.1.2 An obstetrician.

Women would very often die.

Obviously, the mortality rate was quite high because of working with dead bodies and the diseases present.

One day, Dr. Semmelweis made a radical suggestion:

Doctors should wash their hands with soap and chlorine after dealing with cadavers (Figure 0.1.3).

The practicing doctors were appalled at this suggestion because it seemed to imply that they were passing on illnesses to women.

However, despite opposition, the doctors that began implementing this practice had a much lower mortality rate.

While his idea saved countless lives and was supported by the governing bodies at



Fig. 0.1.3 Washing hands with chlorine.

the time, until a conference of German physicians rejected the hand washing doctrine.

He was publicly berated and made many influential enemies.

It was not long before doctors began giving up the practice of hand washing. Opposition from his colleagues caused Semmelweis to lose his job.

He kept trying to convince doctors but had varying levels of success on his own.

Just because the majority of scientists do not believe in a new or revolutionary idea does not make it untrue.

Just because the scientists do not understand everything about the science does not make it false.

It is the responsibility of those in academia to teach what is scientifically accurate above all else.

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