

# HISTORY OF MEDICINE: LAËNNEC'S STETHOSCOPE

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## Introduction

The stethoscope (from greek: stethos=chest, skopein= to view) is an acoustic instrument, used for auscultation. According to tradition, he was invented on February 17, 1816 by the French doctor René Laënnec. Despite this confirmed fact, there are several theories, behind the story of his appearance.

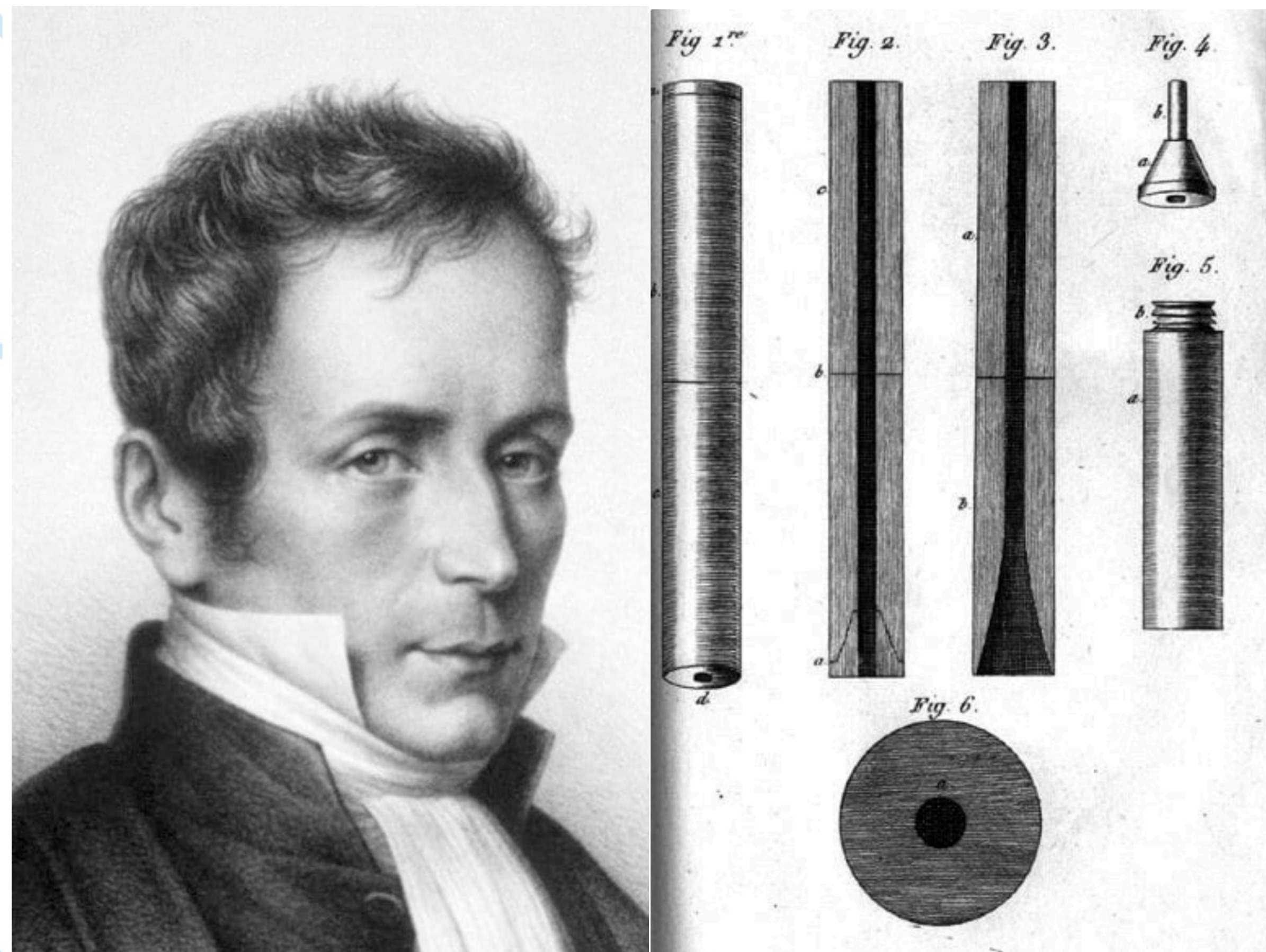


Fig 1. René Laënnec (1781-1826)

*An introduction to the history of medicine, London & Philadelphia, W.B. Saunders, 1914.*

Fig 2. Laënnec's stethoscope:

- 1) assembled instrument;
- 2) and 3) two portions of the instrument in longitudinal section;
- 4) spare part that is applied to the chest;
- 5) the spare part that is applied to the ear;
- 6) cross section.

Image taken from the US National Library of Medicine.

## Keywords

stethoscope, René Laënnec.

## Purpose

We set out to research historical sources to understand how René Laënnec came up with the idea of inventing his first stethoscope.



Fig 3. Modern stethoscope

- <http://historical.hsl.virginia.edu/treasures/laennec.html> (retrieved 13 Aug 2008)

## Material and methods

We used various bibliographic references, articles from periodicals, including electronic period archives, using the keywords.

## Results

His first written description of his system dates back to March 8, 1817. The idea was given during a walk through the Gardens of the Louvre. Laënnec noticed a lot a joyous crowd of urchins played. Reaching the room of his adipose patient, he seized a paper-covered book, rolled it into a tight cylinder, he placed one end of this crude instrument against the patient's heart while he applied his ear to the other end. He could hear the heart sound and also the respiratory murmur. He created mediate auscultation, as opposed to immediate auscultation where the ear was placed directly on the patient's chest. Laennec then built several wooden models.

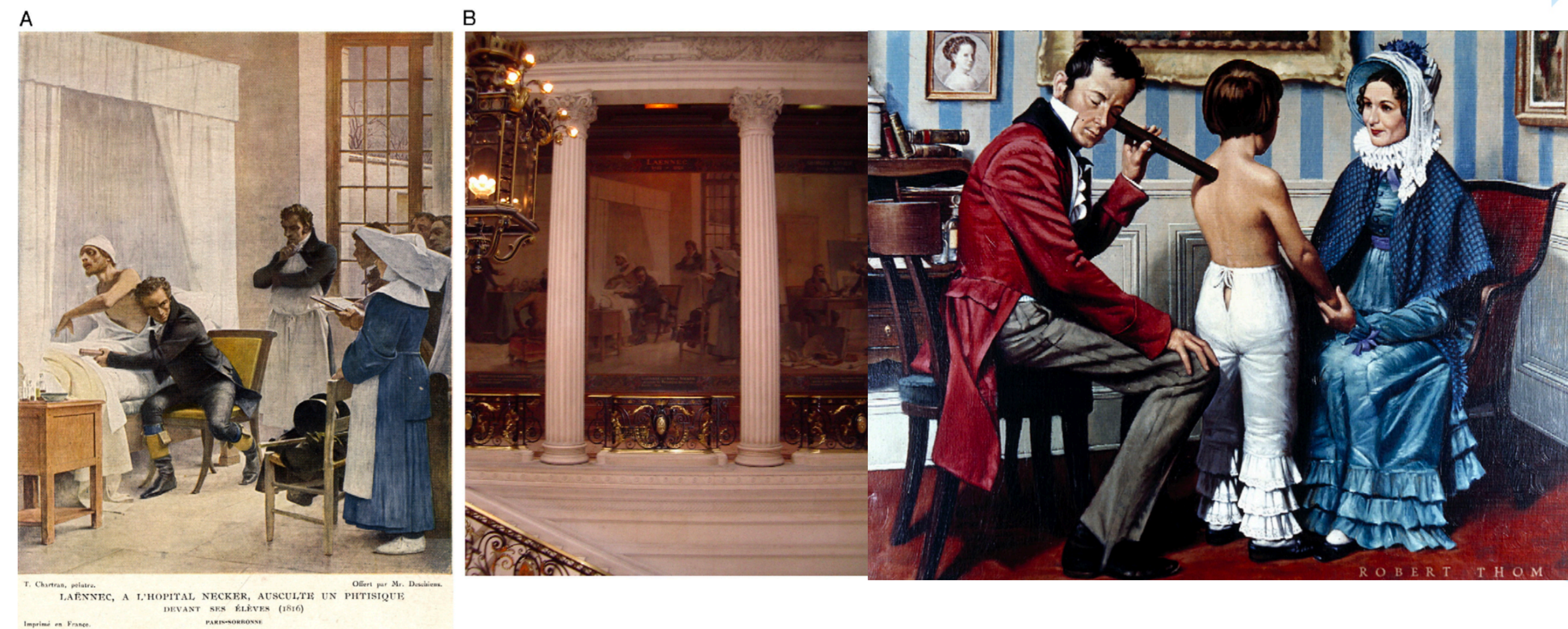


Fig 4. (A) Portrait of Laënnec auscultating his patient while his left hand was holding his stethoscope (Courtesy National Library of Medicine). (B) This famous portrait is now displayed in the Great Hall of La Sorbonne in Paris (Courtesy J.J. Boutaric).

Fig.5. Laënnec using his stethoscope in mediate auscultation

*International Journal of Cardiology 118 (2007) 281–285 , How Laënnec invented the stethoscope, Tsung O. Cheng\**

## Conclusions

Modern stethoscopes took over 200 years of development to produce the tool that has today become a symbol of general medicine. It all started with a paper tube. In his will, Doctor René Laënnec he considered "the greatest inheritance of his life".