

MEDICINE IN NEW FRANCE

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, French medicine takes root in Canada. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

The French explorer Cartier came to the St. Lawrence Valley in the 1530s. Canada stayed French from then 'til England took over in 1760. This land, this New France, grew far more slowly than New England or New Spain, to the south.

Medicine came first to New Spain. The University of Mexico had a medical school as early as 1579. They graduated a kind of ivory-tower medical scholar long before French or English settlers arrived. Harvard didn't set up a medical school until after the Revolution. It was 1820 before Canada had one.

In the long run that may've given the North an edge. New Spain held on to the static academic medicine of Medieval Europe. But the French and English were on their own. So they evolved new medical practices. They paid better heed to native medicine.

Plutarch once said: "As music has to examine discord to create harmony so medicine must examine disease to create health." It was a new and clear-eyed examination of disease that was changing 17th-century medicine. And the new world, especially Canada, was about to become a laboratory for that change.

For years, the medical personnel in New France and New England were what we would call para-medics. New England had seen only one medical doctor by 1650. And he'd come over only to check on a business venture.

But para-medical practice had just found new meaning in France. French physicians sat in their offices and advised. The bloodier work of medicine fell to barber surgeons.

Just after Cartier sailed up the St. Lawrence, a remarkable barber surgeon surfaced in Paris. He was Ambroise Paré -- a superb scientific observer working in a second-class trade.

By 1600 Paré had transformed French medicine by modernizing surgical practice. He finally became part of the medical establishment. But to do that, he'd reshaped medicine itself.

The French became far more clinical. The modern hospital took shape in France. So French colonists were served by field medics -- Catholic nuns, military barber surgeons. Those people reflected the practical turn medicine had taken back home.

Canada may've been late with university medicine. But her hospitals were far ahead of anything to the south. Those hospitals became training grounds for midwives, surgeons, and nurses.

Canada was slow to get there. But by the end of the 19th century, she'd come the farthest. By the early 1900s she'd given us Osler and insulin. She'd given us the state of the art in surgery and anatomy. In the end it took the cold isolation of the American North to bring practical French medicine to full flower.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

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For more on medicine in "New Spain" see Episode [752](#). For more on Ambroise Paré, see Episodes [327](#) and [603](#).