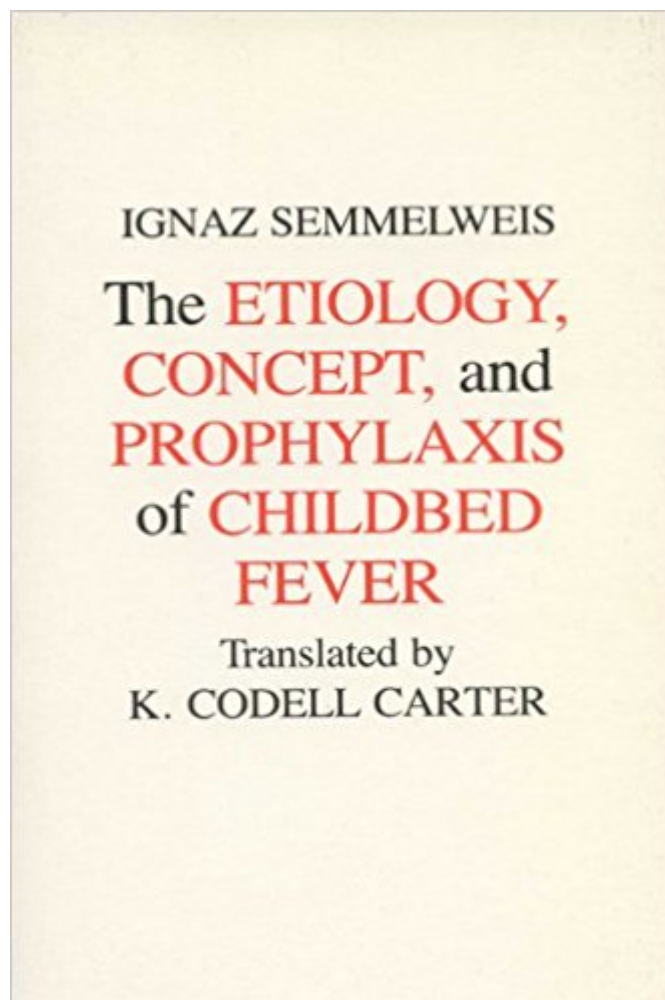




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# Etiology, Concept And Prophylaxis Of Childbed Fever (Wisconsin Publications In The History Of Science And Medicine)



## Synopsis

In 1859 a Hungarian obstetrician named Ignaz Semmelweis, reflecting on his years as resident in the Vienna maternity clinic, wrote a graphic account of his attempt to diagnose and eliminate the then epidemic scourge of childbed fever. The resulting *Etiology* triggered an immediate and international squall of protest from Semmelweis's colleagues; today it is recognized as a pioneering classic of medical history. Now, for the first time in many years, Codell Carter makes that classic available to the English-speaking reader in this vivid translation of the 1861 original, augmented by footnotes and an explanatory introduction. For students and scholars of medical history and philosophy, obstetrics and women's studies, the accessibility of this moving and revolutionary work, important both as an historical document and as a groundbreaking precursor of modern medical theory, is long overdue. Semmelweis's exposure to the childbed fever was concurrent with his appointment to the Vienna maternity hospital in 1846. Like many similar hospitals and clinics in the major cities of nineteenth-century Europe and America, where death rates from the illness sometimes climbed as high as 40 percent of admitted patients, the Viennese wards were ravaged by the fever. Intensely troubled by the tragic and baffling loss of so many young mothers, Semmelweis sought answers. The *Etiology* was testimony to his success. Based on overwhelming personal evidence, it constituted a classic description of a disease, its causes, and its prevention. It also allowed a necessary response to the obstetrician's already vocal, rabid, and perhaps predictable critics. For Semmelweis's central thesis was a startling one - the fever, he correctly surmised, was caused not by epidemic or endemic influences but by unsterilized and thus often contaminated hands of the attending physicians themselves. Carter's translation of this radical work, judiciously abridged and extensively footnoted, captures all the drama and impassioned conviction of the original. Complementing this translation is a lucid introduction that places Semmelweis's *Etiology* in historical perspective and clarifies its contemporary value. That value, Carter argues, is considerable. Important as a model of clinical analysis and as a chronicle of early nineteenth-century obstetrical practices, the *Etiology* is also a revolutionary polemic in its innovative doctrine of antisepsis and in its unique etiological explanation of disease. As such its recognition and reclamation allows a crucial understanding, one that clarifies the roots and theory of modern medicine and ultimately redeems and important, resolute, pathfinder.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Text: English, German (translation)

K. Codell Carter is Professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University. His articles on nineteenth-century medical theory have appeared in a variety of scholarly journals, and his previous books include *A Contemporary Introduction to Logic*.

Translator K. Codell Carter has done a yeoman's job in translating, condensing, and explaining fascinating material that would otherwise be unavailable and probably incomprehensible. Any minor complaints I might have about the book are dwarfed by a recognition of the work involved to produce this enlightening book. Bravo! I read many Internet summaries of Semmelweis, but none compare to writings from the man himself. Semmelweis's logic is compelling, and if he is hard on his critics, they deserved it! His explanation for the inevitable anomalies and background fluctuations in epidemiological studies are understandable and reasonable. For example, one of his detractors (Carl Braun) says that he (Braun) instigated Semmelweis's hand washing method and got no reduction in puerperal deaths. Semmelweis responds (p. 239) with, "This is because his opposition to my teachings cause his students to be negligent." My take--Semmelweis understands students. They take their cues from their superiors. I learned a lot about 19th century medicine, obstetrics, and the conservatism of the Viennese medical establishment. Most surprising was Semmelweis's

acknowledgement of Britain's superiority to the Austrians, Germans, and French in curtailing puerperal fever, the MAJOR killer of child birthing women. He gives the British credit for understanding that the disease was contagious; they used hand washing with chlorine disinfectants and got good results-- 1% maternal mortality, much less than hospitals in Austria and France which sometimes had 10-30% mortality. Semmelweis includes death rates (Table 14 on pp. 142-143) from a Dublin maternity hospital to prove it. If Semmelweis had just had an editor for his 1861 book like Carter (the translator), maybe he would have become a hero a little sooner. Fascinating book about a brilliant man who fought the "good fight."

I had read about Semmelweis in medical school and thought this may be fun to read. It is indeed a great read, and not just for doctors, as anyone can understand the points made in it. It is written in very eloquent language, as was usually the case back then, and also contains a great deal of humour, of which Semmelweis clearly had a lot. It provides a very detailed historical picture of medicine in mid 19th century Austria, and shows how even the most obvious can be refused by the great minds of the time. Advisable for history buffs and medical personnel.

A must read for all infection control nurses or epidemiology students on how hand hygiene can save lives. The man may have been a tad 'off', but was one of the grandfathers of epidemiology and this seminal work should be remembered.

This is a reprint and translation of a groundbreaking work by an eminent scientist. Every hospital, university, and medical school library should have a copy of this work. At this price, they should have at least two copies. In addition to its importance for the medical profession, this book has a great deal of potential interest for historians and feminist scholars. Semmelweis was the father of modern antiseptic theory, the first to recognize a connection between medical students' visits to the dissecting lab and the deaths following their subsequent visits to the maternity hospital, with no washing of hands in between. His fellow physicians refused to listen to him, unwilling to believe that they themselves were carriers of disease. Semmelweis lost his reputation and his job, dying in disgrace, for his refusal to deny the truth. Only after his death, and the deaths of millions more women from childbed fever, were his theories finally recognized and accepted. For a fascinating look at Semmelweis the man, see Jens Bjorneboe's moving play, *Semmelweis*, published by Sun & Moon Press.

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