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Editorial

Alfred Fournier (1832 – 1914). Life and Legacy of the Parisian Dermatovenerologist.

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Abstract

Introduction Alfred Fournier, the first Chair Professor of Cutaneous and Syphilitic Diseases at the University of Paris, had an important role in making venereology an integral part of dermatology. His contributions remain significant over a century after he died in 1914.

Methods This article reviews and synthesizes historical data on Fournier's personal and professional development, presenting key excerpts from his life and work.

Results: Born in 1832, he began his medical studies at *Hôpital du Midi* in Paris. Fournier published influential works on chancre, acquired and congenital syphilis. Many eponyms were named after him, in particular, the Fournier's gangrene. He recognized the contagiousness of secondary lesions and proposed the syphilitic origin of *tabes dorsalis*. Among his interests were the "gonorrheal rheumatism", dermatological manifestations of diabetes, infant's vacciniiform herpes, and drug eruptions. He was President of the first International Congress of Dermatology and his medical activity also included work in public health, especially on alcoholism and tuberculosis. He was posthumously honored with the title Benefactor of Humanity.

Conclusion: As syphilis regains importance in high-income countries and continues to overburden low and medium-income countries, we hope that becoming familiar with Fournier's career can reinforce the interest of young dermatologists in the field of sexually transmitted infections.

Introduction:

Alfred Fournier, a professor of Dermatology of the University of Paris and the one who made venerology indissociable from dermatology. The contribution of Alfred-Jean Fournier to the field of dermatology is still remarkable over a century after his passing in 1914. His significance on the world stage was such that, despite the animosity between France and Germany during the First World War, an eulogy was published by Dr. E Lesser in March of 1915 edition of the *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* (German Weekly Magazine of Medicine). Dr. Lesser attributed the delay in receiving the news of Fournier's death to the “war turbulence”. His publication reads: “Fournier’s work should give everyone inner joy (...) the clarity and simplicity of his writing are admirable throughout his masterpieces (...) he dominates the language (...) the way he portrays the characteristics of the lesions, permits the reader to see them with absolute clarity (...) his words replace illustrations (...) we will continue to use the treasure that he left to us” (1). In this article, we intend to present excerpts from Fournier’s life and work, by synthesizing historical data points of his personal and professional development.

(Insert figure 1)

Life and work

Fournier was born in Paris on May 12, 1832. Studying at the “Lycée Charlemagne”, he became a true lover of the classics and the humanities and mastered Greek and Latin (2)(3). Years later, this knowledge enabled him to translate valuable historical works into French. Examples are the *Le mal français* by Giovanni da Vigo (1514)(4), the picturesquely named *Nouveau carême de pénitence et purgatoire d'expiation à l'usage des malades affectés du mal français ou mal vénérienne* by Jacques de Bethencourt (1527) (5), and the celebrated medical poem *Syphilis ou mal français* by Jirolamo Fracastoro (1530)(6). Fournier began his medical studies at the *Hôpital Du Midi* at the age of 22, after passing the strict examination for interns

at Paris hospitals. He became an intern of Phillippe Ricord (1800-1889), a master venereologist of genuinely innovative ideas that included the individualization of gonorrhoeae and syphilis as separated diseases and the classification of syphilis in three phases which continues to be used. From Ricord, in a collaboration that lasted for more than 30 years, Fournier acquired clinical as well as teaching and oratory skills (7). Still at the *Hôpital Du Midi*, he started his publications. In 1857, he published the *Recherches sur la contagion du chancre*, and, in 1860, the *Leçons sur le chancre*, which he dedicated in recognition of his master. Later, in 1866, he became an associate professor at the *Faculté de Médecine de la Université de Paris*. In 1868, he became *Chef de Service* at the famous *Hôpital Lourcine, l'hôpital pour femmes vénériennes*, and his experience at this hospital allowed him to publish, in 1873, the *Leçons sur la syphilis, étudiée plus particulièrement chez la femme* (8).

Among many original contributions, it is credited to him the recognition of the contagiousness of the secondary lesions, notably mucous patches of the mouth that occurred among workers that shared the pipes used for blowing the melted glass (8). In 1875, he proposed the syphilitic origin of the “tabes dorsalis”, which was eventually accepted after a long debate with the opposition of Jean-Martin Charcot, head of the School of Neurology at Hospital Salpêtrière. Fournier also established the group of parasymphilitic diseases, which included general paralysis and primary atrophy of the optic nerve. In 1879 he published *La syphilis du cerveau*, in which he described dementia and psychiatric disorders (7). Despite these great accomplishments, he incorrectly considered the “pernicious habit of onanism as the cause, maintainer or aggravating factor of epilepsy” (9).

The research on “hereditary” syphilis was one of his most important research. He brought attention to several consequences of this disease: malformations, failure in physical and mental development, hydrocephalus, meningitis, epilepsy, juvenile tabes and progressive juvenile paresis. In 1886 he published *La syphilis héréditaire tardive* (3). Amiably, he named

“Triad of Hutchinson” the occurrence of interstitial keratitis, malformed peg notched incisors and eighth nerve deafness. In return, the English syphilographer dedicated his book Syphilis “to Alfred Fournier”, as a small expression of friendship and high esteem” (2).

(Insert figure 2)

Fournier was awarded several eponyms. The presentation of the five cases of “*gangrène foudroyante de la verge*”, a fulminant and overwhelming genital necrosis, granted him the denomination of “Fournier's gangrene” (10)(11). The perioral rhagades and its scars, seen in cases of congenital syphilis, became known as the Fournier's sign; the anterior curvature of the tibia, the “Fournier's tibia”; and the moriform molars, the “Fournier’s teeth (12). He also studied “gonorrheal rheumatism” and, in the field of general dermatology, he paid special attention to the dermatological manifestations of diabetes, to the infant's vacciniform herpes, and to drug eruptions, especially the ones due to the use mercury and iodides and the similarity between these eruptions and tertiary syphilides (3)

At the age of 48, he was already a member of the *Academie Française de Médecine*, he held the first *Chaire de Clinique des Maladies Cutanées et Syphilitiques de la Faculté de Médecine de Paris* (1870). In 1879, he occupied a new chair on the same fields of medicine at *Hôpital Saint-Louis*, making the venerology into an indissociable specialty of the dermatology (7)(8)(9). With notes taken in a small notebook and surrounded by his collaborators, interns, externs, and students, he coordinated weekly presentations of clinical cases. His routine also included inviting students and friends to dine at his home on Sundays (8). His work attracted renowned dermatovenereologists to Paris, which he received with famous kindness and his world notoriety allowed him to be the *président d'honneur* of the first International Congress of Dermatology in the year 1889 (9).

(Insert Figure 3)

In addition to his academic activities, his well-deserved reputation provided him with a large clientele. Artists, intellectuals, and politicians from all over the world were seen in his waiting. Among them, was Henry de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) who portrayed him in the painting: “*Un examen à la faculté de Médecine de Paris*” (13).

(Insert Figure 4)

Fournier also devoted his life to public health and considered “syphilis, tuberculosis and alcoholism as the scourges of humanity, causing high infant mortality, chronic diseases, and wastage of manpower (7). He urged the authorities to intervene with changes in the legislation. Even after moving away from his activities as a teacher, he maintained his efforts to promote the fight against syphilis (8) . To understand the recommendations of Fournier and other syphilographers of that time, it is necessary to consider the sociocultural particularities and the limitations of the available treatments of that time. The compulsory hospitalization of patients with open lesions in order to avoid transmission and the classification of cases as *imerites* (deserved) or *merites* (non-deserved) dictated by the strict morals of the time are examples of it. By the other hand, Fournier was a visionary when demanding the need of dispensaries that had to be “numerous outpatient services, easily accessed, free of charge, and opened in hours that the worker could access without harming their occupation and their pocket” (6).

His last years were accompanied by suffering, which was caused by the death of his beloved wife and by his heart disease with frequent episodes of severe pain. He passed away in 1914, at the age of 82, and he was buried in the Cemetery Pere la Chaise. His alumni installed a marble medallion, which can still be found on the wall of the amphitheater of the *Hôpital Saint Louis*. He posthumously received the title of Benefactor of Humanity in 1932(2) . As a final tribute, in 1934 the *Institut Alfred-Fournier* was inaugurated (8). This renowned national reference center located in Paris at Boulevard Saint-Jacques is still

providing care and producing knowledge to these days as a significant and deserved recognition of Fournier's life devoted to science and humanity.

This brief review allowed us to appraise the importance of Prof. Alfred Fournier to Dermatology and his role in the integration of venerology into our specialty. His studies and his superb descriptions of syphilis, regain importance as this severe multisystemic and polymorphous disease regains attention in high-income countries and continues to overburden low and medium-income countries. We hope that becoming familiar with this eminent scientist's career can reinforce young dermatologists' interest in sexually transmitted infections.

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Figure 1 - Portrait of Jean Alfred Fournier

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<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/khwjc2vr>



Figure 2 – Caricature of Fournier by Hector Moloch published in Chanteclair Magazine, 1908.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=ALFRED+FOURNIER&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>



Figure 3 - First International Congress of Dermatology. In the first row in the center, from left to right: Profs A. Hardy, P. Ricord and A. Fournier
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A._Fournier,_A._Hardy_Paris._1889_Wellcome_L0009961.jpg

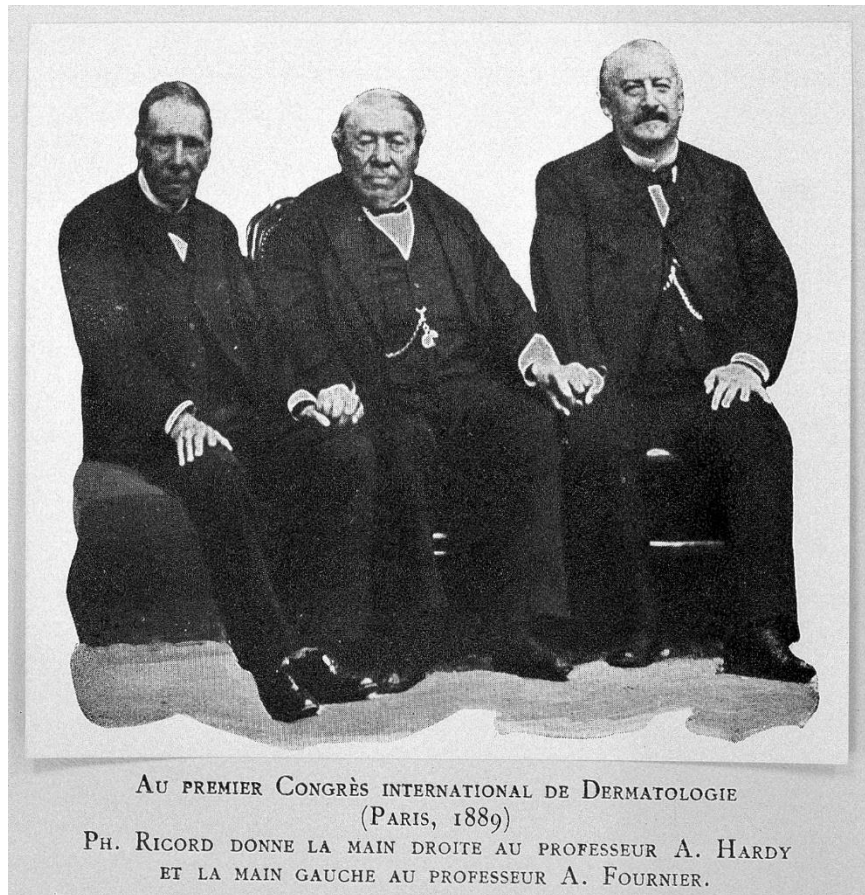


Figure 4 - Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec “An Examination at the Paris Faculty of Medicine” (1901). <https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec/an-examination-at-the-faculty-of-medicine-paris-1901>

