

## Sir Felix Semon (1849–1921): distinguished laryngologist

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Sir Felix Semon, one of the fathers of modern laryngology.

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Felix Semon was born in 1849 in Danzig, Germany, the elder son of Simon Semon, a stockbroker of Berlin. He became a medical student at the University of Heidelberg, but his studies were interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. He served as a volunteer infantryman in the Prussian Guard and was awarded the war medal with five clasps.

After the war, he transferred to the Berlin Medical School, where he continued his studies and qualified Doctor of Medicine in 1873. Semon left Berlin because of the persecution he faced as a Jewish man. He was sickened by the anti-Semitism he encountered in Germany and he knew that he had little, if any, chance of promotion if he stayed.

Semon carried out postgraduate surgical studies in Vienna and Paris and then travelled to London at the age of 25 years, with a letter of introduction to the leading laryngologist of the time, Sir Morell Mackenzie, who received him with kindness, and in 1875 appointed him as clinical assistant at the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat at Golden Square, London. Two years later, in 1877, young Semon was elected to the honorary staff of the hospital.

Semon translated Morell Mackenzie's *Diseases of the Throat and Nose* into German and added his own footnotes. He was soon appointed to the consultant staff at St Thomas's Hospital, London, as physician to the throat department; the first laryngologist in the country to be appointed to a general hospital. He was not permitted to operate externally on the throat, and only allowed to operate via the mouth.

For the external approach, the initial experience of laryngo-fissure for carcinoma of the larynx (splitting the larynx and removing the tumour from within the larynx) was disappointing, but better selection of patients (choosing those cases of tumour confined to the vocal cord) led to improved results.

In 1887, Semon was appointed laryngologist to the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases Queen's Square, where Victor Horsley had been appointed surgeon a year earlier. Semon shared with him an interest in the thyroid gland and they proposed that cretinism, myxoedema and post-thyroidectomy cachexia were all the consequences of thyroid gland deficiency.

Semon put this concept forward at a meeting of the Clinical Society of London in November 1883. At the time his thesis was the subject of ridicule. However, the following month the Clinical Society appointed a committee to investigate this problem. Semon's colleague, Victor Horsley, was co-opted to this group. He carried out experimental thyroidectomies in monkeys and other animals and demonstrated that the clinical conditions could be reproduced in experimental animals. Felix Semon did much to disseminate knowledge on the science and art of laryngology. In 1893, he helped found the Laryngological Society of London and served as its President from 1894 to 1896. He founded *The International Journal for Laryngology and Rhinology* in 1894 and served as its editor for no less than 25 years.

Semon received numerous decorations during his career. At Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 he was knighted. In 1901 he was appointed Physician to King Edward VII and, in the same year, became a naturalised British subject. This was followed, in 1905, by his being appointed Knight Commander of the Victorian Order.

Semon was a man with quite exceptional social gifts; he seemed to excel at anything he turned his hand to. He was a fine pianist and composer; at the end of the Franco-Prussian

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War, his regiment entered Berlin to the strains of the Victory March he had composed when encamped with his regiment outside Paris.

In 1911, at the zenith of his professional career, Semon retired. He spent his time writing his autobiography. The years of the First Great War, 1914–18, were especially unhappy and difficult for him. He was eventually more or less forced to publish a condemnation of his country of birth in *The Times*. He died of heart failure at his home and was buried in Golder's Green cemetery.

A truly remarkable man.

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