

Pierre Fauchard, his life and his work

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ABSTRACT

*Pierre Fauchard (1678-1761) is known as the father of dentistry. This division of medicine participated fully in the enlightenment. After a second reading of his book, *The Dental Surgeon*, an examination of recent publications of 18th century practitioners, and the discovery of new documents, we have gained a better understanding of the man, the dental surgeon, and the place of scientists in his century.*

KEYWORDS

Pierre Fauchard

The Dental Surgeon

Grand-Mesnil

Orthodontics

History of medicine.

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INTRODUCTION

Dentists throughout the world have a good idea of who Pierre Fauchard was because they have often listened to lectures given in amphitheatres bearing the name of the father of dentistry. Pierre Fauchard revolutionized the world of medicine in 1728 when he published a book with the evocative title, *Le Chirurgien dentiste*¹ (*The Surgeon Dentist*). This compound word has taken such an important position in our lives that it is hard to believe someone had to

invent it not so very long ago. From its title to the last of its 900 pages this tome contains nothing but words of scientific reflection, keen observation, and precise clinical sagacity. This great clinician and scrupulous scientist of the century of the enlightenment reported his studies of the dental fields of prevention, anatomy, surgery, dentofacial orthopedics, and treatment for dental and oral disease that until then had been examined only superficially or not

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at all. He wrote, *"I took great pains not to write anything in this treatise that I had not verified exactly in practice. . . I abstained from expressing vague conjectures about matters that are not yet sufficiently understood."*

An indefatigable worker, an academic and a humble scientist, he concluded his work with these words, *"I hope that those who follow me will*

continue the work I began on these matters with greater success."

There are so many reasons that this man has excited the interest of people throughout the world, especially medical historians, but also of members of scientific Academies and universities who understand the importance of teaching the history of medicine and Fauchard's role in it.

PIERRE FAUCHARD'S ORIGINS

The name of the Fauchard family certainly has its origins in Brittany, in the eastern region called Upper Brittany, the Roman or Gallic section of the province. In the 18th century the language of Upper Brittany was Gallic, a specific variety of the *langue d'oïl*. *Pierre Fauchard never wrote of his origins or about his family so we don't know if he spoke Gallic. It is possible because he did not arrive in Paris until*

he was an adult, in 1719. Most biographies of Fauchard, except the one Georges Dagen published in 1961, are largely products of the imagination of authors eager to turn out a romantic life story. They are a form of literature, portraying Fauchard as quite a likeable fellow, the personal dentist of Louis XIV, the Sun King, who had, in fact died four years before Fauchard arrived in Paris.

A WELL-TRAINED AND INTELLECTUALLY CURIOUS PRACTITIONER

Born in 1677 or 1678, Fauchard died at the age of 83 on March 21 1761 in Paris. He trained under a ship's surgeon in the French Navy, Alexandre Poteleret², who Fauchard wrote, *"was very experienced in treating diseases of the mouth. I owe to him the first outlines of the knowledge I have acquired about the surgery that I now practice; and the progress that I made with this skilful man gave me the desire to emulate him that has been the inspiration to make a great number of discoveries. . ."*

Well trained, tireless, and endowed with a remarkable clinical sense,

Fauchard rapidly developed a successful practice treating patients from the area around the cities of Angers, Nantes, Tours, and Rennes. He perfected his skills caring for this population until he felt confident enough to transfer his practice to Paris in 1719 when he was 41. His 23 years of observation and experience soon gained him an excellent reputation in the capital that attracted patients to his office on the Rue des Fosse Saint-Germain-des-Près that he moved to Rue des Cordeliers in 1747.

A GOOD FATHER AND DEVOTED FAMILY MAN

Fauchard married three times and was widowed twice. His second wife's family, also from Brittany, lived in and earned its living in the theatre that his father-in-law, Pierre-Jean Duchemin, a Comedie-Française actor, had established. However, Duchemin's son, Laurent-Tugdual, became an associate of Fauchard. Other Fauchard associates included Pierre Gaulard and Antoine Leroux de la Fondée, Fauchard's only partner (élève associé).

But Fauchard's only son, Jean-Baptiste, born in 1737, did not become a dentist. He chose the law and later became one of the Comédie-Française's most talented actors. Some



Figure 2
Pierre Fauchard (private coll.).

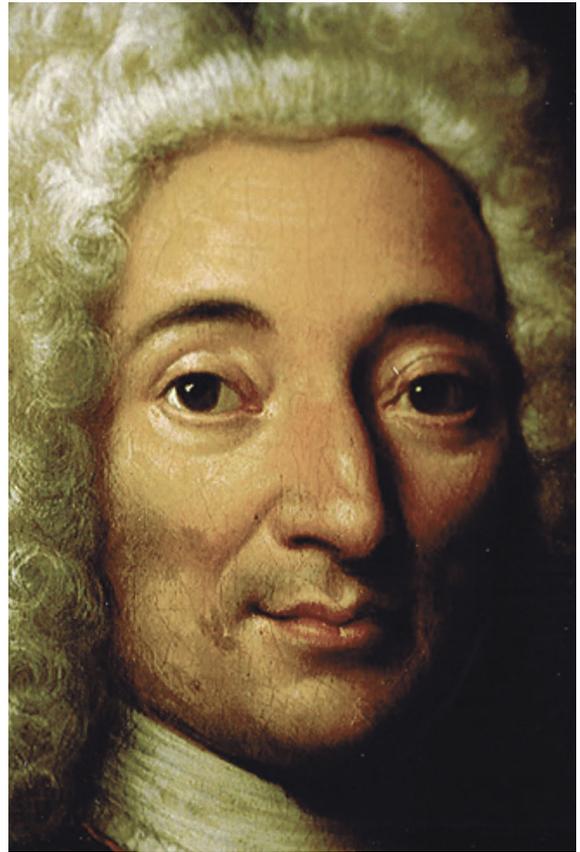


Figure 1
Pierre-jean Duchemin, Pierre Fauchard's stepfather, an actor at the Comédie française (private coll.).

recently discovered letters written by Pierre Fauchard reveal that he was somewhat disappointed that his son, despite his success, had not followed in his professional footsteps.

Sufficiently well-to after practicing in Paris for 15 years, in 1734 Fauchard bought the Chateau Grand-Menil, in the western region of Paris on the edge of the royal hunting grounds, where king Francis 1st had enjoyed amorous adventures with the Duchess d'Etampes. From his father's new manor, the great dentist's son chose his *nom d'acteur*, Fauchard de Grand-Mesnil.

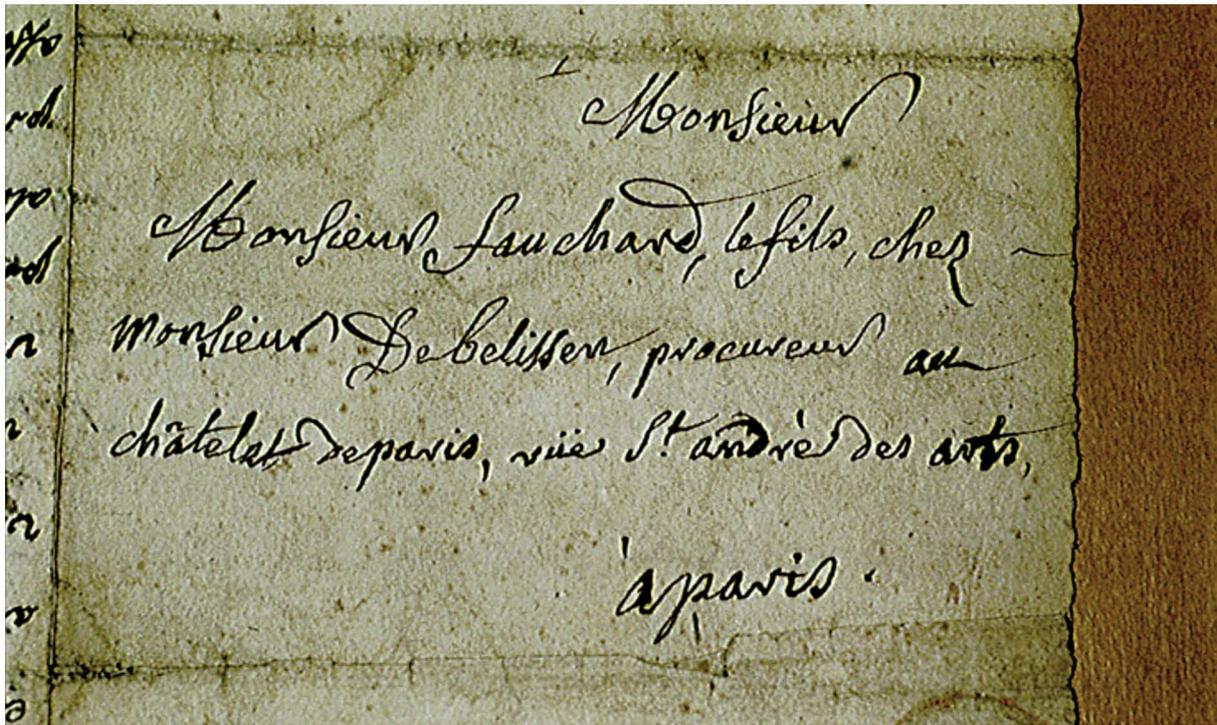


Figure 3
A letter that Fauchard wrote to his son Jean-Baptiste.

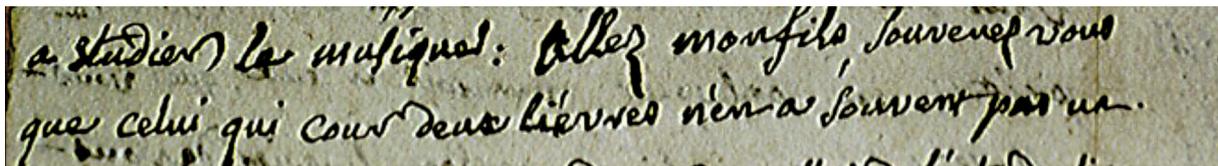


Figure 4
"go on, my son, remember that he who chases two hares often winds up with none."

DENTISTRY IN THE 18TH CENTURY AND THE ROLE PIERRE FAUCHARD PLAYED IN IT

Little by little new categories of practitioners with diplomas and the theoretical background and the technical skills that were an adequate match for the level of knowledge at the end of the 18th century began to emerge^{3-5,10,11}. Accordingly, they

were well recognized professionally and socially as well, which clearly differentiated them from the barber surgeons and snake oil purveyors of spurious remedies for all ailments, including the dental that had preceded them⁶⁻⁹.

The publication of *The Surgeon Dentist or Treatise on the Teeth* in 1728 was hailed as a major professional medical event. The translation into German in 1793, the succeeding improved editions of 1746 and 1786, and the favorable commentaries of Fauchard's contemporaries prove how successful his work was. Lecluze, Bourdet, and Jourdain considered him to be a great master, as did Bunon, who testified in his own book to his "deep gratitude" to Fauchard. The archaic character of medical instruction at the beginning of the 18th century contrasted sharply with the flourishing of knowledge in the intellectual revolution

that made the last half of the 1800s one of the most brilliant eras in history.

At a time when the faculties and colleges of medicine were barely emerging from medieval constriction, when surgeons were painfully separating their specialty from the thrall of physicians, and three years before the creation of the Academy of Surgery, a man defined the term surgeon dentist, and, in 1728 published a complete treatise, the fruit of greatly considered reflections on 20 years of clinical observations. This work would be the definitive dental reference for 100 years.

THE SURGEON DENTIST OR A TREATISE ON THE TEETH

The first 23 chapters of tome 1 of this work deal with the anatomy of the teeth, oral hygiene, maladies of the teeth and the gingiva, and the ergonomics for the delivery of dental care. Next, in chapters 24 to 38 Fauchard presented the clinical observations he had made in 20 years of practice. He discussed operative techniques in chapters 1 to 7 of tome 2, orthodontics and surgery in chapters 8 to 12, and prosthetic techniques in chapters 13 to 26. Fauchard redesigned a number of existing dental instruments and created new ones; he described the instrumentation for the fabrication of artificial teeth and for the construction of the underside of prostheses. He also discussed the material then used for making false teeth. Porcelain was not introduced for this purpose until 1790, almost 30 years after his death. Pierre Fauchard outlined precisely the method of constructing partial

removable dentures and complete dentures. He told his readers how gold, silver, and bone could be employed, and how to use pins and mortises, all in lavish detail, illustrated with numerous plates. One of Fauchard's major innovations, shown in plate 37 on page 290 of his book, was greatly improving the esthetics of dentures by the enameling by enameling them, which he did in collaboration with the best potters of the capital. He also described what still sounds today like an up-to-date root canal technique based on cleaning and obturation.

And 200 years before Housset came up with roughly the same idea for good denture construction in 1959, Fauchard enunciated the triad of balance, stabilization, and retention.

Throughout his two-volume treatise Fauchard paid particular attention to the ergonomics of the dentist's

relationship to the patient and to the instrumentation needed to make it effective.

At the beginning of the century of enlightenment, a man invented, with impressive lucidity, a branch of medicine and labeled it with a new name,

dental surgery or dentistry. To this new science he devoted his whole life and his practical and intuitive intelligence. His academic sense accomplished the rest through his two-volume treatise that he improved and amplified three times.

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