JAN PALFIJN

The records of Kortrijk, Belgium, show that Jan Palfijn was born the son of Egide Palfijn and Marguerite de Rore on November 28, 1650. The city of his birth, in recognition of his services to mankind and science, has named a street in his honor and erected a statue to his memory.

Palfijn's father was a surgeon-barber, a profession considered neither lucrative nor honourable. Palfijn detected that the uncertain and fumbling character of the art caused fear and anxiety on his father's part, and the youngster's sensible and perplexing questions revealed the lack of any scientific foundation behind it. Palfijn recognised the need for a basic knowledge of anatomy, and his energy was directed to this end. To his chagrin, however, the only treatises on anatomy were written in Latin, a language foreign to him. As a result, during the next four years, he acquired a knowledge of Latin in order to translate into a popular language the ideas of those Latin authors whom he valued highly.

It was extremely difficult for Palfijn to obtain cadavers, and he was discovered in a cemetery opening a tomb; he was accused of sacrilege and, to escape the penalty of the law, sought refuge in Ghent. There he became the apprentice of a surgeon who was connected with the medical school, and that enabled him to attend lectures and the privilege to dissect. After remaining in Ghent for 3–4 years, where he also became familiar with the French language, Palfijn left for Paris. There he met and worked with two celebrated anatomists and surgeons. His knowledge became so extensive and his
judgment so exact that many medical practitioners consulted him for the diagnosis and treatment of their patients.

He returned to his native city of Kortrijk, where he married Marguerite Wallaert on November 7, 1679. Five children resulted from this union. He quarrelled with the Royal College of Medicine at Kortrijk and, for his disobedience in refusing to explain satisfactorily a skeleton found in his possession, was fined six florins. He fought the affectations raised by the narrow fanaticism of his fellows and preferred to leave his home rather than sacrifice his convictions. Before he left, Kortrijk denounced the ineptitude of the pseudosurgeons by recounting the unfortunate consequences of their errors of commission and omission.

Having taken frequent trips through Europe to obtain the latest scientific knowledge, he journeyed to Leiden to meet Boerhaave; before doing so, he enquired of some of his pupils if there was any new scholarly work on anatomy. "We study with eagerness," they answered, "the Treatise on Anatomy by Palfijn; it has so charmed our master that he has read it three times." "Well," said the modest traveler, "go and tell him Jan Palfijn waits upon him." Boerhaave had no sooner heard his name pronounced than he rose and embraced him with a most cordial greeting. "It is long since I have desired to see you; your works please me greatly, and I approve of all your opinions." In spite of their cordial relationship, Boerhaave was unsuccessful in luring Palfijn to the University of Leiden.

In 1708, the authorities at Ghent appointed Palfijn as Professor of Surgery because of his outstanding publications, his skill and judgment, and his ability to teach and stimulate younger colleagues. These admirable characteristics next led him to question certain basic obstetric techniques. Palfijn saw that the operation of caesarean section and the operation with the so-called sharp hook resulted in disaster to both the child and the mother. He conjectured that, if the head of the child could be seized by an instrument in the same way as by the palms of both hands, the life of the child might be spared. This simple concept of Palfijn's changed the nature of obstetrics, and he is considered by many as the true inventor of the forceps.

The history of obstetrical forceps is somewhat confused. The Chamberlens of England were supposed to have a secret method of delivery of complicated cases, and other physicians were let in on the secret for a price. Although Palfijn was the author of many superb scientific articles, his particular relevance to us was his role in the development of the earliest practical pair of obstetrical forceps. Several stories are told about his discovery. One of these indicates that Palfijn saw only one blade of the famous Chamberlen forceps and he then devised the opposing blade. Taking the reconstructed instrument to the Paris Academy of Science in 1721, Palfijn called his instrument, "Mains de fer," Iron Hands. Although the preponderance of evidence indicates that Peter Chamberlen, the elder, invented the obstetrical forceps, Palfijn may have been the first to exhibit safe forceps for the delivery of a living baby. Another legend says that Palfijn visited London but did not actually see the Chamberlen forceps in use.