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Blessed Niels Stensen

H. P. Dunn, M.D.

Dr. Patrick Dunn is an obstetrician and gynecologist in Auckland, New Zealand, where he is the local correspondent for The Linacre Quarterly. He was present in St. Peter's, Rome, when the Pope beatified Niels Stensen in the presence of a congregation of over 40,000, including a large contingent from Denmark, on Oct. 23, 1988.



**Bl. Niels Stensen,
by Gerda Plough Sarp (d. 1968)**

Doctor saints are few and far between. Apart from Dr. Joseph Mosconi (d. 1917) who was beatified in November, 1987, and Niels Stensen, this writer is unaware of any others since SS. Cosmas and Damian who probably lived in the 3rd century. Nothing specific is known about them, but their cult was well established by the 5th century.

Stensen, who is known to all modern physicians through his eponymous duct, was born in Copenhagen about Jan. 11, 1638, his father being goldsmith to King Christiaan IV. In later life, while living in various European countries, he was known variously as Nicolas (or Nicolaus) Steno (or Stenon or Stenonis). He studied medicine under Bartholin (of B.'s cyst) and was particularly outstanding in anatomy and physiology. As evidence of his natural brilliance and the broad education of that time, he was also an authority on geology, paleontology and crystallography.

His fame was such that he was soon welcomed at universities in Amsterdam, Leyden, Paris, Vienna, Rome and Florence. In this latter city he was made personal physician to the Grand Duke Ferdinand II and also tutor to the prince-sons of Come III.

One of his interests was the physiology of muscular contraction which was little understood at that time and he produced perfect sketches of the

pattern of the fibres of cardia muscle.

"Richard Lower's (d. 1691) dissection of the spiral structure of heart muscle owed a great deal to Nicolaus Steno whose drawings had appeared previously."¹

From the same source: "Both Steno and Lower followed Harvey and Leonardo da Vinci in insisting that the heart is a muscle like any other. Their anatomical analysis of the spiral form of heart muscle was designed to explain how the heart could expel blood by its contraction."

Again: "In 1664 Steno in his *De musculis et glandulis*, rejecting Descartes' speculations, pointed out that the fleshy parts of muscle are not mere packing, but 'the same fibres which closely united form the tendon, more loosely united form the flesh . . . It is the flesh and not the tendons which contract.'"

As evidence of his versatility: "Willis (of the Circle of W.) as well as others gave more credit (for fertility) to the uterus than to the female testes. It was about this time, in 1667, that Nicolaus Steno ascribed formation and release of eggs to the mammalian female gonad and gave the name *ovarium* to this organ (*mulierium testes ovario analogi sint*). The importance of analogy as an heuristic principle in Steno's deduction has been pointed out. Steno's concept was accepted by Regnier de Graaf (of G. follicle) who in 1672 published his work on the female genitalia, providing at last a thorough and accurate description of the mammalian ovary."

Original Descriptions

In 1671, Steno described for the first time tetralogy as a form of congenital heart defect. He made original observations on lacrymation and the tear ducts; on salivation and his famous Stensen's Duct; on the double spirals in the laryngeal musculature; and on the lymphatics.

Among his many books were: *Elementorum myologiae specimen, seu, musculi descriptio geometrica*; and *Discours sur l'anatomie du cerveau*; and *Dissertatio de cerebri anatome*.

In everything he did, he sought for perfection. ". . . *il ne négligea rien pour se perfectionner*."² He was always conscious of the fact that his researches were revealing the wonder and beauty of God's creation. While giving an anatomy demonstration in Copenhagen, he said: "What we see is beautiful; more beautiful is what we know; but by far more beautiful is what as yet we do not know."³

Stensen had, of course, been brought up as a Lutheran, but in Paris he was influenced by the eloquence of the great Bossuet and set out to read all the Catholic books he could find. These resolved his doubts and led to his conversion — "*et le porta a abjurer publiquement l'hérésie luthérienne en 1669*."⁴

King Frederick III ordered Stensen to return to Denmark but, knowing that he would not have freedom of religion, he refused to go. Frederick's successor, Christiaan V, was more liberal and Stensen went home again to

become Professor of Anatomy. But he was not happy with his way of life and returned after a few years to Florence.

Here he made the momentous decision to abandon his professional career and become a priest in order to give himself completely to the service of God. He wished, in his own words, "to offer Him the best in the best possible way within the limits of my weakness". He was ordained in 1677 and shortly afterwards he was made titular Bishop of Titiopolis by Pope Innocent XI.

During his life as a priest he was widely accepted as a living saint. He lived a life of poverty and preached the gospel with characteristic zeal. He exhorted the priests of his diocese not to be content with doing the minimum, but to give themselves generously to their work for Christ. "For divided Christianity Niels Stensen stands as a sign, exhorting Christians insistently to unity. His message is that ecumenism cannot shut out the demands of truth."⁵

Difficult Pastoral Life

The Pope appointed him Vicar Apostolic for Northern Europe and successively Bishop of Hanover, Munster and Padeborn. His pastoral life was not easy. John Frederick, Duke of Hanover and Prince of Brunswick, abandoned Lutheranism and welcomed Stensen, but his successor, a follower of Luther, forced him to leave the country. In Munster, the Elector of Cologne appointed a new bishop to the see but, as Munster already had three bishops, Stensen objected to the appointment. Once again he had to move on, this time to Hamburg and the court of the Duke of Mecklenburg, where he worked tirelessly as a simple pastor of souls, but without much obvious success.

After a brief illness, Stensen died on Nov. 25, 1686, at the age of 48. He was buried at Schwerin, but later his body was exhumed and buried in the tomb of the Grand Dukes at Florence.

In their daily work, physicians will often remember with gratitude this great man who did such remarkable service for both God and for medicine. They will pray for his later canonization and will hopefully provide from among their patients the first class miracles needed by the ecclesiastical authorities for the happy completion of this enthralling life history.



Nicolaus Stenonis

**Seal used by Bl. Niels Stensen, and his signature.
(Nicolaus Stenonis)**

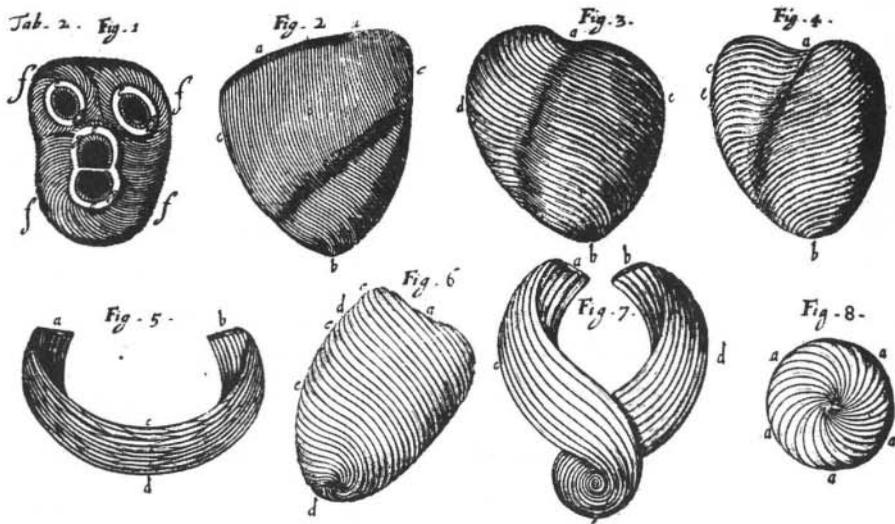


Figure 7. Richard Lower's figures of the pattern of cardiac muscle, to be compared with Nicolaus Steno's illustration of the same subject. (From Richard Lower, *Tractatus de corde*, Amsterdam, 1669, table 2.) By courtesy of The Wellcome Trust.

References

1. Debus, Allen G. (Ed.), "Medicine in Seventeenth Century England," Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. 171.
2. Leclerc, *et al.*, "*Biographie Médicale par Ordre Chronologique*," (Amsterdam, B. M. Israel, 1967), p. 532.
3. Anon., "*Beatificazione del Servo di Dio Niels Stensen*," Vatican City, 1988, p. 17.
4. Leclerc, *et al.*, *op. cit.*
5. Anon., *op. cit.*