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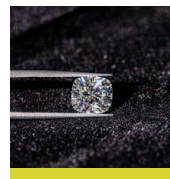
# The Hero Who Saved Lives By Pumping Hydrogen Gas Into His Own Anus

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## HEALTH AND MEDICINE

NICHOLAS SENN PREPARING TO OPERATE. IMAGE CREDIT: [PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#).

Medical history is full of unsung heroes who put in that little bit extra effort for science and humanity, with different degrees of success.

Take for example 19th-century American doctor Stubbins Ffirth, who believed that yellow fever wasn't an infectious disease, and set out to prove it in the most disgusting manner imaginable.

First, he collected various fluids from the infected. He then made a wound in his arm and poured in some vomit, before pouring it into his eyeballs and then drinking it. After not being infected, he moved on to experimenting with patients' blood, saliva, and urine. Of course, it turned out it *was* an infectious disease. He didn't get ill, but only because he had collected his fluids from patients in the last stages of the disease when it was no longer infectious. He had been chugging puke for absolutely no reason at all.

Then, there's Dr Nicholas Senn, an absolute hero who focussed on chugging from the opposite end, so to speak. Let's not beat about the bush, he pumped a large amount of hydrogen gas into his anus all in the name of medicine.

Senn was an American surgeon who served in the Spanish-American War of 1898. At the time, when X-rays were not widespread, bullet wounds to the abdomen where the intestines or stomach were perforated were incredibly difficult to diagnose and locate. This was somewhat of a problem given that without



By  
**James  
Felton**

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in spades, and immediately set to work.

"The first object to be accomplished was to prove the permeability of the entire gastro-intestinal canal to inflation of air." That's medical speak for "I'm about to get a pipe and pop it up the old rectum".

Previous experiments had shown that pumping water up there was a bad idea, including one where "the small intestine of a child on being subjected to over-distension ruptured". Senn opted to use hydrogen, figuring it wasn't an irritant on tissues and could be detected quite easily by setting it alight. As a bonus, any fire would merely cauterize the wound.

He first tried it on some poor unsuspecting dogs, placing some of them under anesthetic and some of them not, before inflating them like unsuspecting balloon dogs. It was a success, in that "all animals not killed immediately after the experiment recovered".

As part of a series of experiments on real human patients to prove its effectiveness and safety, and partly because he was a [bit curious about what it felt like](#), Senn inflated himself.

"Nearly 6 liters of gas were insufflated per rectum. The distention of the colon caused simply a feeling of distention along its course, but as soon as the gas escaped into the ileum colicky pains were experienced, which increased as insufflation advanced, and only ceased after all the gas had escaped, which was the case only after an hour and a half," he wrote.

"When the intestines and the stomach had become fully distended the feeling of distention was distressing, and was attended by a sensation of faintness which caused a profuse clammy perspiration. A great deal of the gas escaped by eructation, which was followed by great relief. The colicky pains

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widespread, meaning that the wounded no longer had to be inflated via the rectum.

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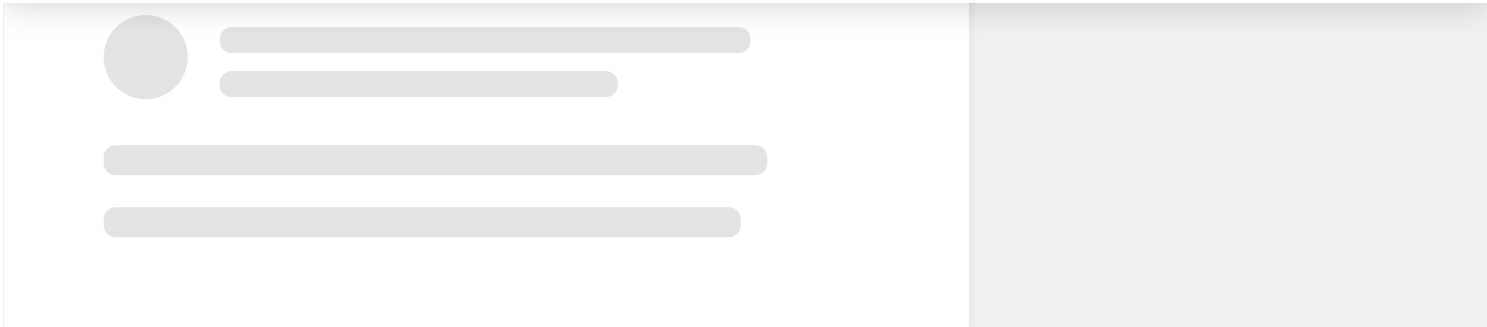
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