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A LOOK BACK

Thermometer

The Greeks knew that body heat rose with illness, but there was no way to measure this observation accurately. Galileo, between 1593 and 1597, was the first person to devise a simple thermometer, the "thermoscope." This device initiated the search for a practical method to measure body temperature.

In 1720, the Dutch scientist Fahrenheit invented a reliable thermometer that accurately measured body temperature. The thermometer was large (a foot long) and clumsy, and it took 20 min to register. Physicians found this to be impractical, and it was not widely used. The thermometer shape was determined by the part of the body where the temperature was taken. By 1800, the curved axillary thermometer (similar to the one illustrated) was available so that the temperature could be read while standing behind the patient with the thermometer in place. However, when removed, the temperature fell very rapidly and the reading was inaccurate.

In 1832, John Phillips, a geology professor from Oxford, invented the index thermometer, which referred to the tiny air bubble separating the column of mercury. This allowed the temperature to remain in position when it was removed. In 1871, the thesis of Leipzig physician Carl Wunderlich, entitled "On the Temperature of Disease," was translated into English. It provided the most systematic description of the relationship between temperature and disease.

The familiar compact mercury thermometer came into use around 1900 and was the standard instrument until it was replaced by digital devices in recent years. Temperature remains an important diagnostic tool signifying the presence of illness even in today's age of technology.

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