



Joseph Plenck (1735–1807): Amalgam of dermatology and ophthalmology

Andrzej Grzybowski, MD, PhD, MBA^{a,b,*}, Barry D. Kels, JD, MD^c, Jane M. Grant-Kels, MD^d

^aDepartment of Ophthalmology, Poznan City Hospital, ul., Szwajcarska 3, 61-285 Poznań, Poland

^bDepartment of Ophthalmology, University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, Poland

^cDepartment of Surgery, Division of Ophthalmology, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT, 06032

^dDepartment of Dermatology 152, University of Connecticut Health Center 153, Farmington, CT 06032

Abstract In today's world of specialization, many of our current major contributors to the medical literature tend to work in only their specialty area. Historically, that was not the case. Great physicians were great observers and often contributed to many areas of medicine. The best example of this type of physician was Joseph Plenck who, although trained as a surgeon, had major impacts on many fields of medicine including both dermatology and ophthalmology.

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Introduction

The fields of dermatology and ophthalmology overlap in many ways. For example, a number of diseases involve the eye and skin. Additionally, many diseases are peculiar to the skin around the eyes, causing patients to consult with both an ophthalmologist and a dermatologist. Finally, several physicians have held an interest and made some major contributions to both dermatology and ophthalmology. The amalgam of both disciplines is best represented by Joseph Plenck, who introduced early skin disease classifications (*Doctrina de Morbis Cutaneis*, 1776)¹ and wrote an important ophthalmic treatise (*Doctrina de morbis oculorum*, 1777).²

Biography

Joseph Plenck (1735–1807) (Figure 1) was born in Vienna, the son of a bookbinder, Franck Plenck, and his wife, Maria

Anna Pochtl. He attended an élite gymnasium and later apprenticed in surgery. During the years 1758–1763, he served in the Seven Year War, eventually as a regimental surgeon. He graduated from the University of Vienna with a master's degree in surgery and obstetrics (Magister Chirurgiae et Obstetriciae) but not as a medical doctor (Medicinae Doctor). Interestingly, his name is not listed in the indices of physicians of the University of Vienna. After Maria Theresia, Empress of Austria, founded a new university in Tyrnau (Nagyszombat) in 1770, he was invited to serve there as a surgeon and obstetrician. The University was relocated in 1777 to Buda, and later to Pest. In 1783, upon his request, Emperor Joseph II granted Plenck to be the director of military pharmacies in Vienna. In 1786, he was appointed a professor in chemistry and botany at the Military Medical Academy in Vienna (the so-called Josphinum), and later Imperial/Royal Councilor, inspector of all military pharmacies, and Secretary of the Military Medical Academy. In 1797, he was bestowed a knight of the kingdom of Hungary. In 1805 he retired. He had become unable to walk due to paralysis of his legs. He died in 1807 in his home in Vienna, survived only by his two daughters. Two of his wives and his four sons had predeceased him.^{1–8}

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0048618739169.

E-mail address: ae.grzybowski@gmail.com (A. Grzybowski).



Fig. 1 Joseph Plenck (1738–1807). (From Crissey JT, Parish LC. *The dermatology and Syphilology of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Praeger Publishers; 1981, p. 20).

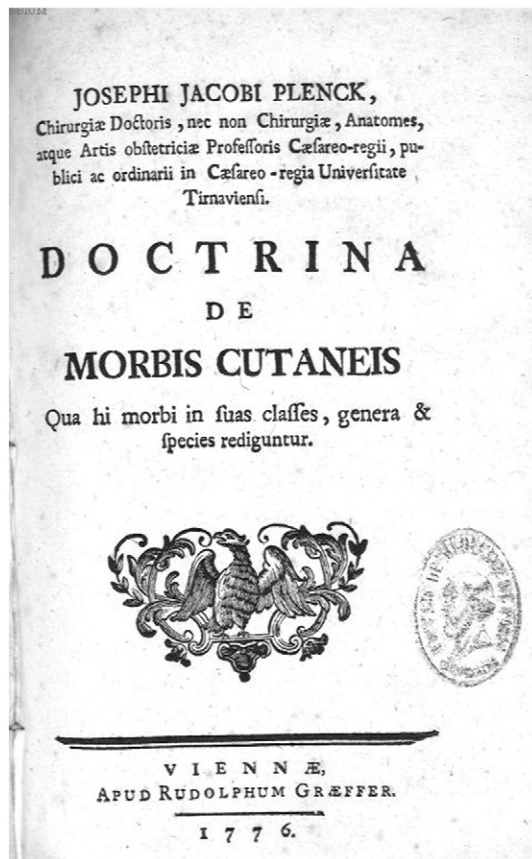


Fig. 2 Title page of Joseph Plenck's *Doctrina de Morbis Cutaneis* (1776).

Dermatology contributions

Plenck was the first to propose the modern system of skin disease classification in his treatise *Doctrina de morbis cutanei*¹ published in 1776 in Vienna (Latin edition) (Figure 2), and in 1777 in Warsaw and Dresden (German edition). Within 124 pages, he described 115 types of dermatoses and divided them into 14 classifications (Figure 3). Before this publication, skin diseases were classified by the region of the body affected. Plenck disclosed his motivation for creating this classification in the book's introduction:

The great number of variety of diseases which affect the skin, the obscurity of the causes from which they develop and the difficulty as well as the diverse methods of curing that arise thence have made the science of medicine and surgery most difficult and hardly understandable for beginners. Finally, these are few writers whom they may approach for consultation; of these some have touched on



Fig. 3 Plenck's classification of skin diseases as it appeared in his *Doctrina de Morbis Cutaneis* (1776).

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