

Semmelweis and the discovery of pathogens: Or why you need to wash your hands before touching patients.

Cast

Ignaz Semmelweis:	The Chief Doctor	Doctor Black	a young doctor
Sister Margaret	The nurse in charge of the maternity ward	Doctor White	a young doctor
Annabelle	a young pregnant woman	Doctor Green	a young doctor
Mary	a young pregnant woman		
Bridget	a young pregnant woman	Narrators 1 – 6	6 Narrator characters
Nurse Agnes	a young nurse		
Nurse Barbara	a young nurse	Body	none-speaking part

Stage and scenery



3 tables to act as beds

In the ward



Another table to act as a surgery table

Props

If you have the odd white lab coat for the doctors great, otherwise all that is needed is some old tea-towels or rags stained with red blotches to act as blood stained rags. If you feel the group can be trusted an old kitchen knife could also be used.

Act one

Narrator 1 The scene is a hospital in the Austrian capital city, Vienna, in the year 1847. Unlike a hospital today it was a dark, forbidding place. People would fear having to go into the hospital as many people died when they were there. There were no electric lights and washing and cleanliness were nowhere near what you would see in a modern hospital. The brilliant young doctor Ignaz Semmelweis is doing his morning rounds with the Chief nurse, Sister Margaret. They are going round the wards checking on the many pregnant young women who are in the hospital.

Semmelweis: Good morning Sister Margaret. How are things this morning?

Sister Margaret: Fine, fine Doctor Semmelweis. We had six more women admitted on to the ward last night. All of them due to give birth in the next few days, God Bless them.

Semmelweis: Well let's see if we can make sure their stay is a healthy one. Who is this.?

(they approach the first patient in bed)

Sister Margaret: This is Annabelle. She came in last week, her baby is nearly due.

Annabelle Good morning Doctor, I am going to be ok aren't I, I hear that so many women die in this hospital?

(Another patient in the next bed shouts out)

Mary Yes it's the curse of Childbed fever. It will get us all, mark my words.

Sister Margaret Shush, ladies shush. I am sure you will be fine.

Semmelweis Yes ladies, don't worry. We have some fine doctors here who will look after you.

(a third patient joins the conversation)

Bridget I hope so. I need to drop this baby so I can get back to work.

Annabelle Get back on the streets you mean.

Sister Margaret *(whispers to Semmelweis)* Bridget works in a local Inn but the other girls don't seem to like her.

Narrator2 The Vienna General Hospital was a leading Hospital at the time. Many young men wishing to be doctors came to the hospital to learn their profession. It was expensive to train to be a doctor so they tended to be rich young men, sons of Lords and ladies and other well to do people.

(a group of doctors enter the ward. They are wiping their blood covered hands on very dirty rags.)

Doctor Green Ah good morning ladies. Are you all well?

Annabelle, Bridget and Mary: Oh yes Doctor. Very well thank you

Doctor Black Good good, we will soon have those babies out of you, I'm sure you will be wanting to get back to all the other children you have in those hovels you come from.

Semmelweis Good morning Doctor White, Doctor Green, Doctor Black. I see from the blood you must have just come from the operating theatre.

Doctor White Yes a most interesting case Doctor Semmelweis. He was an Inn Keeper, who had drunk himself to death. When we cut him open, you should have seen his liver. It was very swollen and an evil black colour.

Doctor Green And the smell!!!!!!

(All there doctors laugh out loud)

Doctor Black (goes over to Annabelle) Now then young lady let me feel your belly. See if that baby is ready to be born.

(the other doctors move to a patient and examine them)

Narrator3 The Vienna Hospital had a reputation all round the world. In those days doctors only had a basic understanding of disease. They had no idea about microbes and bacteria as it was years before a microscope would be invented that could see them. They believed that diseases could be caused by "vapours," bad smells and also that God decided who lived and died and that with some people, particularly poor people, it was just their bad luck.

(a young nurse rushes in)

Nurse Barbara Sister come quick: Mrs Brown has gone into labour and it looks like the baby is the wrong way round.

(they all leave the ward)

Narrator 4 One thing that doctors were very good at in those days was Anatomy, the study of where all the bones, nerves, organs of the body were placed. They would do many dissections on dead bodies, cutting them open to see the organs inside. Our three doctors are dissecting a young woman who died from the feared childbed fever.

(The three doctors are stood round a dead body on the lone table)

Doctor Black; hmm I can't see anything different inside her. She had all the symptoms though, so a classic case of childbed fever. But I wonder what caused the fever?

Doctor White; Damn, that knife is sharp. I've just cut myself.

Doctor Green; Here use this cloth *(passes him a blood stained cloth)* you don't want to get blood on your suit.

(Back on the maternity ward)

- Narrator 5;** It is early morning next day. Once again Doctor Semmelweis is talking with the sister. Nurse Agnes is with them today.
- Nurse Agnes;** It was very sad, Mrs Brown died in the night. We tried to save her but she had a fever and died in front of us. That's six women this week, all of them within a few days of giving birth.
- Sister Margaret;** Annabelle who you saw yesterday is in labour at the moment. I hope all goes well.
- Nurse Agnes;** Doctor Semmelweis, why do so many women keep dying? The other doctors don't seem to care but these poor women. They come in here but only about half of them leave alive.
- Semmelweis;** I know it's terrible. I've been thinking about it. Nurse Agnes. When did you last wash your hands?
- Nurse Agnes;** I gave them a good wash last night after I put my children to bed. You know how dangerous it is to wash your hands too much?
- Semmelweis;** And you Sister?
- Sister Margaret;** I washed them this morning, after seeing to the patients, but they are a bit smelly after helping with Mrs Brown.
- Nurse Agnes;** Doctor Semmelweis, if you pardon, why do you ask?
- Semmelweis;** I have an idea. It doesn't feel right that we go from touching dead bodies to touching healthy bodies.

(another young nurse comes in)

- Young Nurse;** Come quickly Doctor. It's Doctor White. He's very ill. I think he's going to die.

(they rush to Doctor White's bed: Use the lone table)

(Sister Margaret checks him out, but shakes her head)

- Sister Margaret;** We are too late he's died.
- Doctor Semmelweis;** it's very odd. The symptoms he had, what do they seem like to you Sister?
- Sister Margaret;** Why they seem like the ones the women have when they die of Childbed fever. But they can't be he's not a woman.
- Doctor Semmelweis;** Yes but he was dissecting a woman who died from the fever. I wonder if he was affected by something from the body.
- Sister Margaret** But what can we do?

Doctor Semmelweis Sister I want us all to try something. I'd like us all to wash our hands with water that has the chemical chlorinated lime in it. I want us to do it several times a day, especially after we have been touching sick people.

Sister Margaret And the other Doctors?

Semmelweis: I want them to wash their hands too.

Young Nurse They won't be happy

Semmelweis They won't but I will talk to them. Look here they are now.

(enter the two remaining doctors)

Semmelweis Doctors. I think we have been spreading something from the bodies of the corpses we dissect, to the women having babies. This causes them to die of Childbed fever.

Doctor Black What! That is outrageous! You are accusing us of killing these women!!

Doctor Green It's not us, we are Doctors, we save people's lives. This is God's punishment on these godless women.

Semmelweis I disagree. I think we pick up some form of contagion that we spread from body to body.

Doctor Black That's impossible, you can see clearly that all it is is blood.

Semmelweis Even so when you are working on my wards I want you to wash your hands every time you have dissected a body and especially before you touch healthy patients.

(the doctors discuss and mutter between themselves)

Doctor Black: Ok we'll do it.

Doctor Green We think you're mad but we agree.

Narrator 6 So over the next few months all the medical staff started to wash their hands more often and especially after touching sick people or dead bodies. Remarkably within a few weeks the nurses began to notice less people died from the dreaded Childbed fever.

Sister Margaret It was amazing. Who would have thought that just washing your hands could help save so many lives?