

# *Medical Heritage Trail*

Rare Medical Book of the Month:

# *Observationes Medicae*

By Nicolaes Tulp (1593-1674)

First Published 1641  
Elzevier, Amsterdam

Rare Books copies:  
1. Latin 5th Edition 1716  
Elzevier, Amsterdam

2. Dutch 1st Edition 1750  
Jacob Benjamyn, Amsterdam

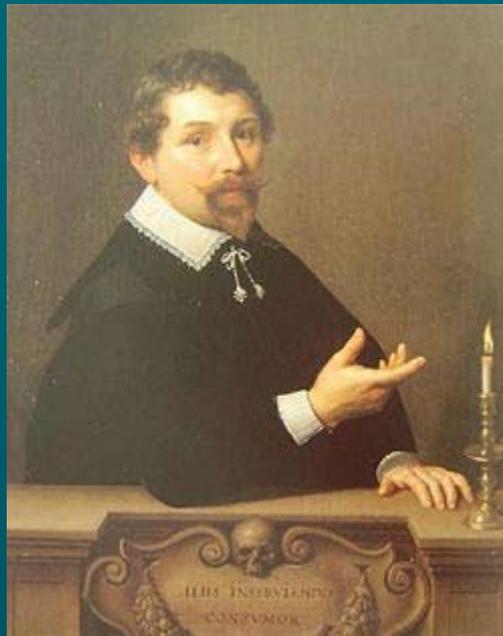


The University of Sydney  
Faculty of Medicine

## *Nicolaes Tulp (1593 - 1674)*

**N**icolaes Tulp was born Claes Pieterszoon in 1593, the son of a wealthy merchant who was active in civic affairs. From 1611-1613 Claes studied medicine at the University of Leiden. He returned home to Amsterdam to establish his practice in a rapidly growing city whose merchants were supporting exploration and colonisation in America and the East Indies.

A man of his time, he married in 1617, fathered children and involved himself in city politics; his standing as a doctor ensuring respect for his other ideas.



He adopted the national emblem, the tulip, as his family shield and changed his name to Nicolaes Tulp.

As well as building his reputation as a physician, Tulp became more and more influential in local politics, becoming city treasurer and then magistrate of Amsterdam in 1622.

Tulp lived in exciting times. The Netherlands was at last independent from Spain and intellectual life flourished in safety from the Inquisition. The city of Amsterdam was exploding, its population in 1580 being 30,000 and to become 210,000 by 1650. Amidst this expansion, Tulp's career as a doctor and politician made him a man of considerable importance. As a doctor his duties were diverse; Tulp signed the medical certificates of fitness for the Dutch settlers bound for New Amsterdam in the early 1620s.

## *Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons*

His unblemished moral reputation and professional standing led to his appointment as praesector of the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons in 1628, which carried with it the obligation to deliver a yearly dissection or 'anatomy lesson'. European law of the day only permitted the dissection of bodies of executed male criminals who were not of the Church. These dissections required the consent of the City Council and all council and Guild members were obliged to attend and pay a fee for admission. Attended by such learned men, these annual lessons were an important forum for the exchange of ideas about anatomy and human physiology.



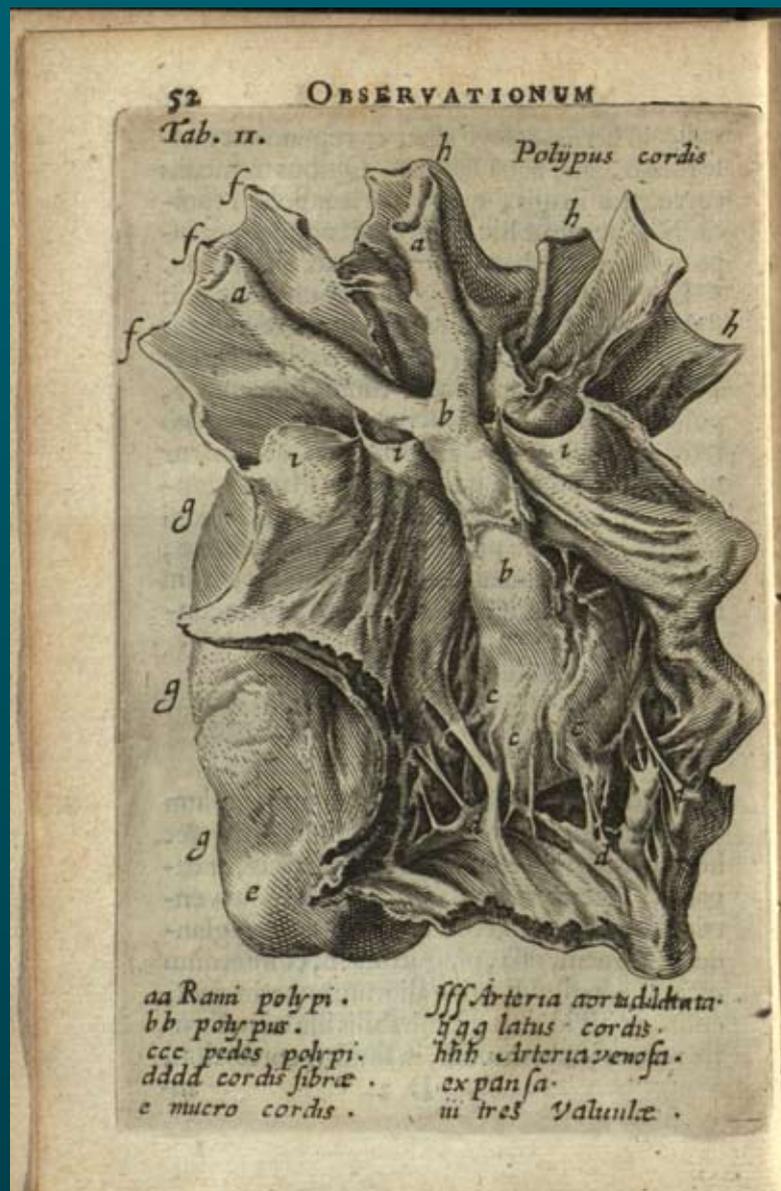
When the Guild of Surgeons commissioned a commemorative painting they chose Rembrandt, a young artist of 26 and new to the city. The famous portrayal, *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* depicts Tulp demonstrating the structures of the forearm to a group of members of the Guild.

One of Tulp's responsibilities was the inspection of the growing number of apothecary shops which were serving the growing population and burgeoning shipping trade. When Amsterdam was hit by the plague in 1635, Tulp was so dismayed by the unscrupulous marketing of highly-priced 'anti-plague' medicines that he organised a consortium of doctors and apothecaries to produce the first pharmacopeia of Amsterdam, *Pharmacopoea Amstelredamensis*, published in 1636. A formal qualifying exam for apothecaries was introduced in the Netherlands (the first in the world) with this text defining the curriculum.

## *Observationes Medicae*

Tulp's most important book, *Observationes Medicae* distills Tulp's experience and philosophy of medical practice. The first version (1641) was written when his son Pieter graduated from medicine. Sadly, the second edition (1652) is dedicated to Pieter who had recently died. Tulp wrote in Latin, purportedly because the general public would be unable to read it, to prevent them from treating their own illnesses.

The book gives minute descriptions of 231 cases of diseases and death, many considered unusual such as migraine, beri-beri and the metabolic syndrome. Ahead of his time, he describes the effects to the lungs of tobacco smoking and gives a psychological account of the placebo effect. Tulp also discovered the ileo-caecal valve (at the junction of the large and small intestines) which was known as 'Tulp's valve' for many years. His description also shows a device for tapping ascites in the abdomen.



## ‘The Book Of Monsters’

The book was nicknamed “The Book of Monsters” because Tulp represented and described animals brought back by scientists and traders from the Dutch East Indies. He also represented various forms of developmental abnormality.



The book was popular in its time. So much so that an unauthorised Dutch language translation, with inferior quality of both printing and illustration, was produced in 1750.

Tulp remained a public figure of prominent standing throughout his life. In 1654 he became Mayor of Amsterdam for four terms. In 1673 he was appointed a member of the Governing Committee of the Republic in the Hague. The following year, 1674, Tulp died and is buried in the New Church of Amsterdam.

Tab. XIII

Homo sylvestris.  
Orang-outang.

