This Month in History, August:
Yellow Fever and Dr. Carlos Juan Finlay

Yellow fever is a particularly deadly virus with a long history in the United States. Indeed, by one count, yellow fever was America’s most frequent epidemic between 1650 and 1918, quickly followed by cholera, measles and influenza. In its final stage “yellow jack”, as it was sometimes called, would cause fever, jaundice, bleeding from mouth, nose and even eyes, seizures, liver and kidney failure.

1793 saw the first major U.S. outbreak of yellow fever in the city of Philadelphia. In that year, 10% of the population died. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician in the city, advocated re-balancing the humors of patients through excessive bleedings and mercury cures (purges). History often refers to his methods as “heroic medicine” as a patient truly needed to have heroic resolve in order to undergo therapy.

Finding the cure for yellow fever required discovering its cause and for this we can thank a Cuban ophthalmologist named Carlos Juan Finlay (1833-1915). Dr. Finlay practiced ophthalmology in Havana and studied yellow fever which was a terrible problem in his country. **Dr. Finlay theorized that the mosquito was the vector for the disease and published his findings on August 14, 1881.**

In 1900, Walter Reed, MD and his commission confirmed these findings which were then implemented by William Gorgas who was losing 10% of his workforce each year to malaria and yellow fever during the construction of the Panama Canal. General Leonard Wood noted, “The confirmation of Dr. Finlay’s doctrine is the greatest step forward made in medical science since [Edward] Jenner’s discovery of vaccination.”

Learn more about infectious diseases and the role of ophthalmology in our upcoming exhibit: *Contagion! Epidemics in Ophthalmic History*