

## How President Garfield Died; Or Being Grateful For Modern Medicine, Despite The Cost

Want to be grateful for modern medicine, despite the way it can wreck the health of your wallet? All you have to do is read about President Garfield's medical care circa 1880 when he was shot by an assassin. The tale of woe came to our attention as the result of a new exhibit at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, located on the campus of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The exhibition is intended to mark the 125th anniversary of his assassination. To begin with, the gentleman remained alive for eighty days after he was shot twice by an assassin, who will go unnamed, because we don't believe in giving publicity to such miscreants, since we think the quick notoriety encourages other deviants. The first bullet just grazed the President's arm. The second one, however, hit the right side of his back and lodged in his torso. The display shows it penetrated his first lumbar, or lower, vertebra. Today, such a projectile would be easy enough to spot and extract. After receiving a similar shot to the body, President Reagan was up and out of the hospital in no time. But back then it was an entirely different case. Garfield's doctors, who didn't have modern diagnostic machines to aid their vision, could not decide where the bullet was lodged. A dozen or so medical experts probed the place of penetration, often using unsterilized instruments or bare hands. Sterile procedures had been developed by then, in the 1860's, by the British surgeon Joseph Lister, but were not yet appreciated in the colonies. Historians are in agreement that Garfield died, not of the bullet, but from a massive infection due to unsterile medical practices. One desperate observer suggested that the docs should just turn the President upside down and see if the bullet would fall out. The exhibit also includes an image of the metal detector designed by Alexander Graham Bell to locate the bullet. Unfortunately, his invention failed to detect the location of it. Historians think the reason may be that the device picked up metal coils in the President's mattress or because Mr. Bell only searched on the right side of Garfield's body, where the head physician thought the bullet was lodged. The autopsy revealed that the fatal shot pierced his vertebra but missed the spinal cord. It had not clipped any major arteries or veins or entered any major organs. It was, in fact, stuck in adipose tissue, that is, in fat, on the left side of his back. Dr. Ira Rutkow, a professor of surgery at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and also a medical historian, noted, "Garfield had such a nonlethal wound. In today's world, he would have gone home in a matter of two or three days." In addition to causing the infection with unsterile techniques, Garfield's doctors limited his solid food intake, because they thought the bullet might have punctured his intestines. "They basically starved him to death," Dr. Rutkow said, pointing out that the President lost over 100 pounds from the time he was shot until he died. Sterile practice was finally widely adopted in the US in the early 1890's. The X-ray was also discovered in the 1890's. The assassin was hanged in 1882. Even he blamed Garfield's doctors, stating, "I just shot him." So, next time you get a big medical bill, just think of Garfield. While you can still regret the cost, thank your lucky stars for modern medicine. When people grouse about the questionable benefits of modernity, I always remember modern medicine as one of the really positive revelations of the potential of the human race to improve its lot, the sorriest aspects of which are all too often self-inflicted.

### About the Author

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