

Even Presidents Get Sick

By John R. Goodman BS RRT

November is the month when we hold many of our local, state, and national elections. Every four years we vote in a new, or hold on to our current president. Have you ever wondered about the general health of the President of the United States or POTUS as he is known by the secret service?

Presidents are ordinary men, some younger when they take office, some older, but none of them possess any type of superior immune system. They are only human. They get sick, have heart attacks, strokes and any other number of assorted aches and pains. A number of our past presidents were unable to complete their full terms.

Although it seems there has always been a “physician to the President,” this is simply not the case. To clarify further, during most of the 18th and 19th century there was no physician on duty at the White House. Early presidents simply used their family physicians, perhaps from the military and any fees charged came directly out of the President’s pocket. The first Surgeon General wasn’t appointed until 1871.

Washington’s ongoing battle with false teeth has been documented for a very long time. By middle age he had virtually none of his original teeth left. He had a number of sets of false teeth made for him, and these less than perfect fittings contributed to the rather dour expressions seen in some of his most famous portraits.



Young George



Years later still no smile

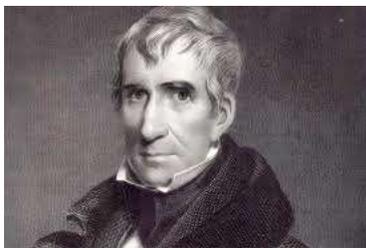


Still frowning

While most Americans are thoroughly familiar with paintings of George Washington that show a tall, rugged, healthy looking individual, even George

Washington was not immune to a number of illnesses of the day. From the time he was 17 until his death at the age of 67, GW was often very sick. He survived diphtheria, malaria (x5), smallpox, tuberculosis(x2), dysentery(x3), pleurisy, pneumonia, and finally succumbed to what was later determined to be epiglottitis. (Complete loss of his upper airway) On his deathbed he was bled four times in just 12 hours. A total of 80 ounces of blood were removed. This would have been roughly 35% of all the blood in his body. Although many were quick to claim that the treatment of George Washington on the last day of his life hastened his death, it was actually in keeping with the accepted medical practices of the day. A tracheotomy would have almost certainly been life saving, but Mrs. Washington would have none of it.

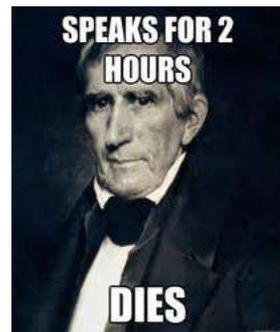
At least George Washington lived to serve out two full terms. What about our 9th president William Henry Harrison? Harrison was 68 years old when elected in 1841. Due to his age (remember life expectancy in 1841 was 40.9 years) he faced many rumors that he was both too old and unwell to serve as president. To overcompensate for these perceived problems, Harrison campaigned very actively in a way that left him physically exhausted. On the day of his inauguration (March 4, 1841) the day was cold and overcast with a temperature of 48 degrees. Harrison chose not to wear an overcoat, hat, or gloves. His speech of 8445 words is to this day the *longest inauguration speech* given by any president. But it wasn't until nearly 3 weeks later that he developed a severe chest cold which presumably developed into pneumonia. Of course, Harrison's physician bled and "purged" him with opium, castor oil, and Virginia snakeweed. These treatments only served to make Harrison delirious, and he became the first president to die in office at 12:30am on April 4th 1841, exactly one month after taking the oath of office.



William H. Harrison



Inauguration Day 1841



Sad but true

And it didn't take long for the second president to die while in office. Just 9 years later our 12th elected president, Zachary Taylor was also unable to complete his full term. July 4th 1850 saw the afternoon temperature reach 100 degrees. President

Taylor was attending the laying of the cornerstone for the Washington Monument. He spent several hours in the hot sun viewing the various celebrations. Upon returning to the White House that evening, he and his assorted guests consumed a large amount of ice water, cherries, green apples, and cold milk. Given the fact that cholera was an ever present problem in the days before refrigeration and the hot and humid weather, it is likely that President Taylor came down with a serious case of what his doctors called “cholera morbus.” Administration of mercury and opium did little to relieve his condition, and the president died just 5 days later on July 9th. For the record, President Taylor was also bled and purged.



President Taylor



Taylor's inauguration



Laying cornerstone of Washington Monument



Taylor on deathbed

We all know that 6 of our previous presidents have been the victims of actual or attempted assassination. Some of these are more famous than others. For instance, did you know that President Andrew Jackson was the first president to be shot at by a would be assassin? On January 30th 1835 President Jackson was on his way to attend the funeral of a congressman. Following the service he was passing the Capitols east portico when he was approached by an unemployed house painter named Richard Lawrence. Although less than 8 feet away, the pistol misfired. Lawrence than pulled out a second pistol and unbelievably it too misfired. The first attempted assassination of an American president had failed.

Any student of history is well acquainted with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. As we all know, President Lincoln died the next morning of a single shot to the back of the head delivered by a well known actor named John Wilkes Booth. No need for further details here.



Abe Lincoln 16th president of United States



John W. Booth... Assassin!



Lincoln died the next day

Just 16 years later James A. Garfield would become the second president to be assassinated in office. A few months after he was sworn in as 20th president of the United States, Garfield was shot by Charles Guiteau. Guiteau was a mentally disturbed individual who shot the president two times. Although the president survived the initial wounding, most probably infection set in. President Garfield managed to hang in there for 80 days, but he died on September 19th 1881.



James A. Garfield



Garfield's assassination



William McKinley



McKinley's assassination

Twenty years later President William McKinley was standing in the receiving line at one of the exhibitions at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo NY. Another mentally deranged man named Leon Czolgosz had hidden a 32 caliber revolver under a handkerchief. He shot President McKinley twice at very close range. Emergency surgery was done in an attempt to remove one or both of the bullets. Unable to find either, the tears in the president stomach were repaired, and the wounds cleaned. Initially, President McKinley did fairly well, but by September 13th his condition began to deteriorate, and he died (probably of infection) early on September 14th 1901.

The fifth name on our list of presidents would be President John F. Kennedy. President Kennedy was shot in the back of the head and neck by Lee Harvey Oswald on November 22, 1963. Numerous conspiracy theories have been advanced in the nearly 50 years since the assassination. A very recent review of the Kennedy assassination has raised a very interesting observation. Almost everyone knows that JFK had very bad back pain going back to injuries sustained in WW2. On that particular day in Dallas he was wearing a very stiff back brace which actually prevented him from falling forward after the first 2 shots. Tragically, if he had not been wearing the brace, the third bullet would have certainly missed him by more than few inches. Few would argue however, that Kennedy could have ever survived the massive head wounds he sustained.



John F. Kennedy



Ronald Reagan

And finally we have the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan. Just two months after he was inaugurated as our 40th president, Ronald Reagan was shot by John Hinckley after giving a speech at the Washington Hilton. Hinckley fired a number of shots, one of which ricocheted off the car door and hit Reagan in the chest. It took three hours of surgery to find and remove the bullet that had entered his lung. Interestingly, while President Reagan's wound was much more serious than either Garfield or McKinley before him, advances in medicine and surgical techniques helped insure that Reagan would not only survive the surgery, but return to his full capacity as President of the United States in just a few months.

I guess one of the conclusions we can draw from the history of the American presidency is that it is a position that comes with a number of high risks. We have had a total of 43 presidents (remember Grover Cleveland won twice in non-consecutive elections) since George Washington. 4 presidents died in office, and 4 were assassinated while in office. This means that 18.6% of our previous presidents truly gave their lives for their country.

There are quite a number of medical maladies that affected a good number of our past presidents, but one of the strangest medical mysteries had to be that which happened during the second term of President Grover Cleveland. Shortly after Cleveland took office in 1893, he noticed a little bump or rough spot on the roof of his mouth. It was near his molars on the left side...his cigar chewing side! By early summer it had grown quite large, and his personal doctor diagnosed it as a cancer. Cleveland knew he had to do something right away, but was worried that the news would send Wall Street, and the rest of the country into a panic. This was during the perilous time in US history where Congress was deciding whether to use silver or gold as our currency standard.

Cleveland had called a special session of Congress to vote on this topic set for August 7th. In lieu of all that was at stake, Cleveland decided to keep his cancer a

secret and give the official word that the President had an extremely bad toothache, and the tooth needed to be extracted.

Ah, but who could be trusted with the truth, and who could do the delicate operation the cancer dictated. If truth is stranger than fiction, here is one fantastic example. Cleveland announced plans to go on a fishing trip on a friend's yacht called the "Oneida." It was to be a 4 day fishing trip from New York to his summer home in Cape Cod.



Grover Cleveland



The yacht "Oneida"



Part of the surgical team

A team of six surgeons, several dentists, and an anesthesia specialist were all secretly in place aboard the ship. Somehow, on a moving ship, and in just 90 minutes, the medical team removed the tumor, 5 teeth, and a good sized piece of the president's upper jaw bone. The team was so good, they managed to remove the tumor through the president's mouth so there was no noticeable scar to the public. A small but interesting detail was they kept President Cleveland's large well known "walrus" mustache in place to help hide the surgical scars. Truly this was an extraordinary achievement in American medicine. If you just allow yourself the time to picture the scene, it might have seemed impossible, and certainly foolhardy. Modern day surgeons who read the account of the operation stand in awe as a similar operation today would take several hours, and that's doing it in a modern operating room suite...not on a moving yacht! Truth indeed, is much stranger than fiction.

