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Félix d'Hérelle

Félix d'Hérelle is credited for two brilliant discoveries that together signify a scientific revolution. Considered an "outsider" in science, this vagabond scholar set up a lab in his Montreal home at age 24 and went on to discover a biological control of pests and a cure for bacterial infections using bacteria-eating bacteriophages. d'Hérelle's work led to the founding of the "Phage Group" of scientists who collectively ushered in the era of molecular biology.

Félix d'Hérelle applied a single-minded enthusiasm and scientific thoroughness to every new challenge. Records from his first assignment on behalf of the Government of Canada to explore the feasibility of fermenting and distilling maple syrup into "whiskey" were meticulous and reveal the qualities of a great scientist.

At age 28, d'Hérelle was appointed the sole bacteriologist of Guatemala, the first country of at least fifteen where he would make a scientific contribution over the next five decades.

Fame for d'Hérelle began in 1911 when his first paper on biological control of locusts with Coccobacilus bacteria was presented at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Six years later, in 1917, he discovered 'bacteriophages' and bacteriophage therapy. In typical Pastorian style, he moved from his laboratory findings to the field setting up phage-therapy trials around the world.

Interest in bacteriophages grew rapidly over the next two decades until the introduction of antibiotics in the 1940s. Now, with the golden age of antibiotics almost over, phages are receiving renewed attention as a remarkable natural remedy for bacterial infections, in particular those caused by antibiotic-resistant pathogens.

During his lifetime, d'Hérelle was nominated for the Nobel Prize at least thirty times and by eight different groups in 1926 alone. His tendencies to challenge fellow scientists and voice his socio-political views may have contributed to him being overlooked. Among other numerous achievements, d'Hérelle was awarded honourary degrees from four universities including the Université de Montreal and Université Laval.