

SPOTLIGHT

HUMAN BODY LOUSE



Human body louse (*Pediculus humanus humanus*) that I collected from the clothing of a homeless man in a primary care clinic in Philadelphia.

In 1837 W.W. Gerhard, a physician at the Philadelphia Alms House Infirmary, described an epidemic of typhus in the city the year before. It afflicted 230 to 250 people, especially in a neighborhood bounded by Lombard and Shippen (Bainbridge) Streets, and Fifth and Eighth Streets. He wrote:

The origin of the disease is unknown...It attacked those who were sunk in poverty and intemperance, and huddled together in confined apartments.¹

The human body louse (*Pediculus humanus humanus*) was later shown to transmit the pathogen that causes epidemic typhus (not to be confused with murine typhus, transmitted by fleas, as mentioned in Chapter 2). Unlike head lice and pubic lice, the human body louse resides in its host's clothing. Only while feeding does it move onto its host. Human body lice are closely related to head lice and likely evolved from them. In contrast to infestations of body lice, infestations of head lice in Center City are common, especially on children, and are not associated with transmission of disease.²

I diagnosed no case of typhus and encountered only one patient with human body lice in Philadelphia during my practice of primary care medicine, which spanned almost four decades. This patient changed his clothes only when they wore out, and he never washed them—even though he understood that his clothes harbored lice.