

# Medicine in Stamps

## William Osler (1849–1919): medical educator and humanist

Tan S Y, MD, JD and Uyehara P\*

Professor of Medicine, University of Hawaii

\*Research done during senior medical elective at John A Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii

**W**illiam Osler is arguably the most famous of Canadian doctors and medical educators. Born in 1849 in remote Bond Head, Ontario, he held professorships at McGill, Penn, Johns Hopkins and Oxford. His name is synonymous with bedside teaching and medical humanism, captured by eloquent aphorisms such as: *“It is much more important to know what sort of patient has a disease than what sort of disease a patient has.”*

**BECOMING A DOCTOR** Osler was the eighth of nine children. A mischievous young child, he was repeatedly into pranks and provocations, which ended in expulsion from grammar school at the age of 14 years. In a penitent step towards appeasing his father, an Anglican minister, Osler enrolled in Trinity College to study theology. There he met his first mentor, a Reverend William Johnson, who introduced him to the fascinating world beneath a microscope, but failed to inspire young Osler in the spiritual realm. Rev Johnson was a naturalist in the fashion of the mid-19th century, and with his encouragement, Osler grew increasingly attracted to the biological sciences. It was during this time that Osler acquired his first book, Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*, which attempted to reconcile spirituality with medical science. The book would remain his favourite and most oft quoted work for the rest of his life.

Leaving the ministry behind, Osler transferred to medical school, graduating from the University of Toronto in 1872. For the next several years, he studied at various continental institutions of renown in London, Paris, Venice and Berlin. Among others, he befriended Rudolph Virchow, the famous German pathologist, who is credited with inspiring him to turn professor. These early

experiences left an indelible imprint on Osler’s teaching philosophy, which embraced European, especially German, pedagogy.

**PROFESSIONAL LIFE** Osler’s early teaching career was at McGill, followed in 1884 by a professorship at the University of Pennsylvania. He began his illustrious career by advising students to immediately amass a library of the great classics and *“spend the last half-hour of the day in communion with the saints of humanity.”* Osler was enamoured of the writings of Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, Cervantes, and Shakespeare. In addition, he studied and mastered the history of science. He took for himself, and recommended for others, the motto *“Aequinimitas”*,

suggesting a peaceful countenance in dire and stressful circumstances. Noted for cultivating humanism in medicine, he professed his empathy by insisting that medicine was ultimately about healing the patient, not simply treating the disease. As a professor of clinical medicine, he was fully dedicated to his teaching duties. A former student of Osler recounted how the professor had copies made of his house key so that students could use his personal library. Likewise, Osler’s wife created a warm and welcoming sanctuary for their visitors, so much

so that their Philadelphia home was known as “The Hotel Open Arms”.

Osler introduced novel and bold teaching methods. He introduced the German model of residency with one year of internship as the core of postgraduate training, which continues to the present time. And he incorporated bedside rounds in all of his student classes, a rare routine in America at the time. Direct patient contact was considered beyond the abilities of students, but Osler firmly believed in the utility of learning from patients, this



belief vividly conveyed in his oft-quoted metaphor: “*He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all.*”

Towards the end of the century, Johns Hopkins University embarked on an audacious expansion into medical education. Increasingly recognised as one of the foremost professors of medicine, Osler was invited there along with three other illustrious physicians to become the founding academicians of the new School of Medicine. Osler was “the leading light of the Hopkins faculty”, and his portrait hangs today in the Welch Medical Library on the campus of Johns Hopkins University along with William H Welch, Howard A Kelly and William S Halsted in John Singer Sargent’s famous painting “The Four Doctors”. For 16 years, he remained at Hopkins, a beloved teacher, celebrated speaker, respected community physician and ever-curious pathologist. Throughout this period as chief of medicine, he made no revolutionary medical discovery and introduced no new surgical procedure. Yet his clinical acumen and inspirational teaching were legendary. Several conditions bear his name, e.g. Rendu-Osler-Weber disease (hereditary haemorrhagic telangiectasia), Osler-Vaquez disease (erythraemia), and Osler’s node (painful subcutaneous lesions in the digits seen in subacute bacterial endocarditis). Most of all, he contributed vastly to the modernisation of medical school curricula (medical school admitted only graduate students), and physician training (central role of ward rounds).

Osler wrote prodigiously, publishing over 1,500 medical journal articles, textbooks, monographs and biographical sketches. His single-authored *Principles and Practices of Medicine*, a compendium of medical knowledge written in just seven months, became the gold standard of medical texts for the next 30 years. He was a gifted and sought after speaker, with many of his lectures collected and published in *Aequanimitas*, a must-read eye-opener on the art of medicine. He read voraciously and founded journal clubs at McGill, Pennsylvania, and Hopkins. In the interest of sharing ideas and research with colleagues, he became a founding member of many medical societies, and held leadership positions in over 100 professional organisations.

**GOLDEN YEARS** Osler believed that, “*The teacher’s life should have three periods, study until twenty-five, investigation until forty, profession until sixty, at which age I would have him retired on a double allowance.*”

In his farewell speech to students and faculty at Hopkins in 1905, Osler, then 55 years of age, quoted facetiously from Anthony Trollope’s satire, *The Fixed Period*: “*The plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college into which at sixty, men retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform.*” The speech lost him some admirers. Despite his protestations that he was merely trying to lessen the blow of his departure with humour, the press derided him for advocating euthanasia.

Osler’s seeming obsession with early retirement proved futile. No sooner was he out of Hopkins when Oxford called, naming him its Regius Professor. Osler managed to divide his time between Oxford, running an almshouse, and consulting for the Canadian Army Medical Corps. He earned a baronetcy, and became Sir William Osler in 1911. His lifelong love affair with books took centre stage in his life’s last chapter. He and two assistants spent the next eight years cataloguing his vast collection of titles by the “saints of humanity.” At his death, the books passed into a collection preserved in the Osler Library at McGill University.

In his private life, Osler was devoted to his wife Grace Revere Gross, a great-granddaughter of American revolutionary Paul Revere. He also doted on his only son, Edward Revere Osler, who died in the war in France in 1917. The loss left him depressed, causing him to cry often. Weakened and dispirited, he fell victim to pneumonia, the old man’s friend as he had once called it, dying in the afternoon of December 29, 1919 from pulmonary haemorrhage. He was 71. Many words, such as urbane, witty, sparkling, warmhearted and magnetic, have been used to describe this great scholar, perhaps the most befitting being, “the most distinguished of American professors of medicine.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bliss M. William Osler: A Life in Medicine. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
- Bryan CS. Osler: Inspirations from a great physician. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- The Collected Essays of Sir William Osler. McGovern JP, Roland CG, eds. Birmingham, AL: Classics of Medicine Library, 1985.
- Nuland SB. Doctors: The Biography of Medicine. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- Osler W. *Aequanimitas: With Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: P Blakiston’s Son & Co, 1906.
- Osler W. *An Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1908.
- Reynolds R, Stone S, eds. *On Doctoring*. 3rd ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.