William 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.”

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