

Sir William Osler: an outstanding teacher of clinical medicine

This year marks the centenary of the death of Sir William Osler, still regarded as one of the greatest teachers of clinical medicine and whose books and published writings, although now somewhat dated in style, can still be read today with benefit and, indeed, pleasure.

Osler was a Canadian. He was born in 1849 in the little town of Tecumseh in Ontario, where his father, originally in the Royal Navy and now an Anglican minister, was the vicar.

In 1867, young Osler, aged 17 years, enrolled as a medical student at Trinity College, Toronto, where he excelled in gross and microscopic anatomy. Three years later he transferred to the more prestigious McGill University, Montreal. Here he fell under the influence of Palmer Howard, the Professor of Medicine, who fostered Osler's lifetime interest in pathology. He qualified in medicine at the age of 22 years in 1872 and was encouraged by Howard to pursue an academic teaching career in medicine. To further this, Osler embarked on a 2-year postgraduate visit to Europe, studying physiology, pathology and ophthalmology in London, Berlin and Vienna.

Osler returned to Canada in 1874 and, at 25 years of age, was appointed to a lectureship in medicine at McGill – he was younger than some of his students. He spent the summer of 1878 in London, when he passed the, in those days, notoriously stiff examination for Membership of the Royal College of Physicians. At McGill, he taught physiology, histology and pathology as well as working on the smallpox ward at Montreal General Hospital, where he was appointed attending physician in 1884. During his years at Montreal, Osler published widely, on case reports, clinical lectures and pathological studies.

In 1884, Osler visited Germany again, where the bacteriological studies of Robert Koch and his school were establishing revolutionary ideas on the aetiology of the major infectious diseases.

While in Germany, Osler was invited to apply for the chair of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, to which he was appointed. As Professor of Medicine in that city, Osler continued to perform frequent autopsies but his skill and kindness as a clinician made heavy demands on him. He had an excellent bedside manner and was a brilliant diagnostician. He was particularly adept at dealing with sick children. His private practice grew, with consultations frequently taking him far away from Philadelphia, including calls to presidents and their families in the White House. Many of his patients were doctors and their families and medical students.

Osler's next move, at the age of 39 years, came in 1889, when he accepted the invitation to take up the Chair of Medicine at the newly opened Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore. Among the other distinguished appointments were William Halsted in surgery and Claude Welch in pathology. During his period of tenure at Baltimore, Osler wrote his textbook *Principles and Practice in Medicine*, one of the last single-authored texts to cover the whole of medicine. In Osler's lifetime it went through eight editions and was translated into French, German, Spanish and Chinese.

Osler's years in Baltimore were the busiest and most productive in his professional life. He continued to write articles on a whole range of clinical subjects, had an extensive clinical practice and was in great demand as a public speaker, both in the USA and abroad. His collection of addresses to doctors and medical students, entitled *Aequanimitas*, was published in 1904 and read widely – I have my own copy beside me as I write this. Although rather old fashioned to modern readers, it still has its charm. Interestingly, Osler made no major contribution to scientific progress in medicine; his reputation

was based on his writings, brilliant bedside teaching and lecturing.

In 1905 came Osler's last move, when he was invited to become the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford on the retirement of Sir Burdon Sanderson. This was something of a sinecure for the University of Oxford had no clinical school; its preclinical students going on mainly to the London teaching hospitals for their clinical years. At Oxford, Osler was able to spend more time cataloguing his extensive medical-historical library and was in continual demand as a lecturer. He also edited a massive seven-volume *System of Medicine*, and was one of the founders of the *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*. In 1911, Osler was created a baronet.

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 brought much additional work to Osler, who acted as consultant to numerous hospitals and relief organizations, as well as entertaining many friends and old students with the Canadian army medical corps stationed in England and, after 1917, American medical colleagues.

In August 1917 came a personal wartime tragedy; Osler's only child, his son Revere, serving with the Canadian artillery in Flanders, was fatally wounded by shrapnel and survived only a few hours. Osler never really recovered. His health began to fail, with repeated episodes of chest infection. He died of a pulmonary abscess at his home in Oxford on 29 December 1919, 100 years ago, aged 70 years.

At the time of his death, Osler was without doubt the most famous and revered doctor in the English speaking world. His reputation was based on his outstanding ability as a teacher, both at the bedside and in his extensive writings.

In my office I have framed on the wall a typical Oslerian aphorism: 'To study Medicine without books is to sail uncharted seas. To study Medicine without patients is not to go to sea at all'. Deans of Medicine, please note. [BJHM](#)

Conflict of interest: none.

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