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Surgical Leaders *Sir William Osler, M.D., C.M.*

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SIR WILLIAM OSLER impacted medical education and the practice of medicine like few other physicians. As a writer, he authored nearly 1500 publications and lent his name to numerous eponyms. As a teacher he educated vast numbers of students and through his legacy impacted countless more. Sir William Osler (Fig. 1) epitomized what a physician should be throughout his professional life.

Named after William of Orange, William Osler was born on July 12, 1849, in Bond Head, Canada West, what is now Ontario. His father, Featherstone Osler, was a former Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Featherstone had previously been invited to serve as the science officer aboard the H.M.S. Beagle during Charles Darwin's voyage to the Galapagos Islands. It was an offer he turned down as a result of his own father's failing health. He went on to become a "saddle-bag minister" in rural Canada. William was one of several children in the Osler family; his siblings included Britton Bath Osler, a famous lawyer, and Sir Edmund Boyd Osler, a banker and politician who was knighted for his efforts in founding the Royal Ontario Museum.

Initially William sought to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a minister. Educated originally at Trinity College School in Western Ontario, he eventually progressed to Trinity College in Toronto in the Fall of 1867. It was there that he realized his true interest lied in medicine, which caused him to leave Trinity to enter the Toronto School of Medicine. William was later accepted to the MDCM program at McGill University, where he eventually received his medical degree in 1872 earning Dr. Osler both the titles "MD" (medical doctor) and "CM" (*Chirurgiae Magister*, meaning master of surgery).

William Osler traveled to Europe to complete his postgraduate medical training, as many physicians did at that time. Dr. Osler returned to McGill University as a Professor in 1874 where he created one of the first formal journal clubs. In 1884, Dr. Osler was lured to Philadelphia to become the Chair of Clinical Medicine

at the University of Pennsylvania. It was a position he would hold until 1889, when he was approached by Dr. William Welch to become the Physician-in-Chief of the soon-to-open Johns Hopkins Hospital. Osler can be seen alongside William Henry Welch, William Stewart Halsted, and Howard Kelly in the painting "The Four Doctors" by John Singer Sargent (Fig. 2) that depicts the physicians who founded The Johns Hopkins Hospital. Johns Hopkins grew considerably both in reputation and in size under Dr. Osler's tenure. In its first year, there were 220 beds and the hospital treated 788 patients. Sixteen years later when Dr. Osler left, the hospital treated more than 4200 patients. In 1905, Dr. Osler was offered the position as the Regius Chair of Medicine at Oxford, possibly the most prestigious medical appointment in the world at that time. In Oxford, he was elevated to baronetcy by the Coronation Honours List of 1911, conferring on him the title of Sir William Osler.¹

Of his many accomplishments, Dr. Osler was most proud of the changes that he implemented in medical education. While at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, he established a full-time, sleep-in residency program that was "open-ended" with many residents staying for 7 or 8 years. Dr. Osler also pioneered the practice of bringing third- and fourth-year medical students into the wards for bedside rounds where he and other physicians demonstrated the art of physical examination (Fig. 3).² Dr. Osler was known to have remarked, "He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all." Throughout most of his life, Dr. Osler was a prolific author with a bibliography that included nearly 1500 entries. The most well known of Dr. Osler's literary works was *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, originally published in 1892. The text revolutionized medical literature at that time and remained the standard clinical textbook of internal medicine for greater than 50 years. *The Principles* was translated into many languages and remained in publication with updated editions until 2001. As his reputation in the medical world grew, Dr. Osler became regarded as one of the most influential physicians in the English-speaking world and was highly coveted not only as a consultant, but also as a speaker. Of his numerous addresses, the most memorable was

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FIG. 1. William Osler by Thomas C. Corner (1865–1938), 1905. Source: The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives.

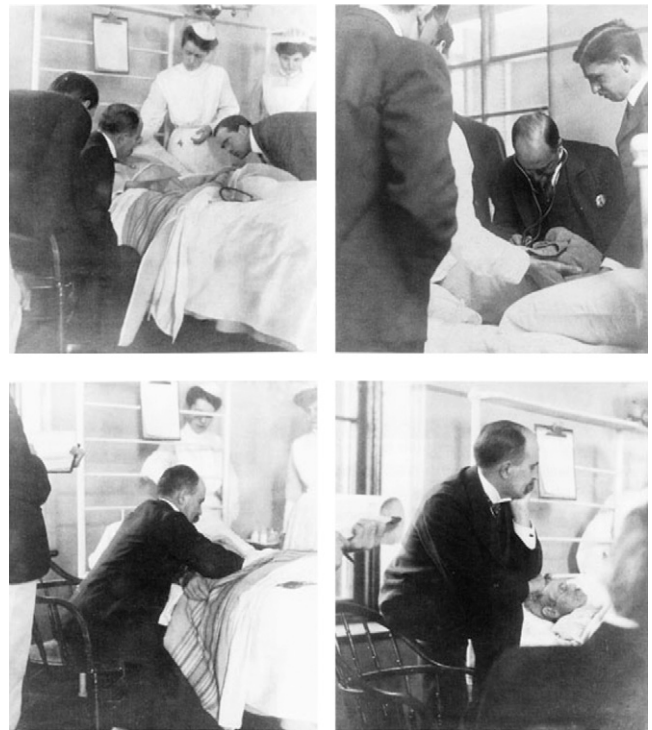


FIG. 3. Series of four photographs of Sir William Osler at the patient's bedside in the stages of observation, palpation, auscultation, and contemplation. Source: William Osler: a Life in Medicine by Michael Bliss.



FIG. 2. "The Four Doctors" by John Singer Sargent (1905). Left to right: William Welch, M.D., William Halsted, M.D., William Osler, M.D., and Howard Kelly, M.D.

Aequanimitas, which he delivered in 1889 at his farewell address on leaving Philadelphia to assume his role at Johns Hopkins. In it, Dr. Osler emphasized the importance of imperturbability among physicians. *Aequanimitas* is the motto of the Osler family crest and still appears on the Osler housestaff tie and scarf at The Johns Hopkins Hospital.

In his personal life, William Osler was known to be a practical joker, writing a series of pieces under the pseudonym "Egerton Yorrick Davis." The most well known was a piece that was published in 1884 in the *Philadelphia Medical News*. It detailed a "rare" and likely fictitious medical condition known as *penis captivus* and was written in response to a report published 3 weeks prior by Dr. Theophilus Parvin on vaginismus. Reportedly, Dr. Parvin and Dr. Osler, who both sat on the journal's editorial board, occasionally disagreed; thus, it was no surprise that Dr. Parvin became the target of one of Dr. Osler's many practical jokes. At age 42 while working in Baltimore, Dr. Osler became reacquainted with Grace Revere, the great-granddaughter of Paul Revere. Grace was the widow of Dr. Samuel W. Gross who died in 1889 while serving as the Chair of Surgery at Jefferson Medical College. Dr. Osler had been a colleague of Dr. Gross and had frequently been entertained as a guest in the Gross household. Legend has it that Dr. Gross, on his

deathbed, requested that Dr. Osler look after his wife. After Dr. Gross' death, very few specifics are known of the relationship between Dr. Osler and Grace. It is known that on the day that they were married, Saturday, May 7, 1892, the two had shared breakfast with Grace's doctor, J. C. Wilson, who did know of their relationship. At the end of the casual meal, Dr. Wilson left for work and reportedly asked William and Grace that he be invited to the wedding. At this time Dr. Osler and Grace boarded a hansom cab to St. James Church before walking to the train station. Wilson received a note dated for the following day that read:

Dear Wilson,

That was the wedding breakfast at which you sat yesterday! We went round the corner at 2.30 to a parson and settled matters in a quiet sensible fashion.

Mrs. Osler sends her kindest regards.

The Oslers had two sons, one of whom died shortly after birth. The other, Edward Revere Osler, was born in 1895 and served as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. Edward fought in World War I and was wounded by artillery fire in Belgium during the third battle of Ypres in 1917. Eventually, he succumbed to his wounds and died in August of 1917. His body was buried in Dozinghem Military Cemetery in West Flanders, Belgium. Those who knew William Osler said that the death of Edward greatly affected him for the 2 years that remained of his life.

Osler became ill during the Spanish influenza epidemic in 1919. He remained ill for 2 months before dying of pneumonia at his home in Oxford on December 29, 1919. At the time of his death, Sir William

Osler's obituary appeared in the *British Medical Journal*.³ Regarding his numerous accomplishments, Dr. Osler wished that his legacy, above all else, would be as an educator of medical students. Dr. Osler was known to have said "I desire no other epitaph... than the statement that I taught medical students in the wards, as I regard this as by far the most useful and important work I have been called upon to do." While working at Johns Hopkins, Dr. Osler gave many students keys to his home in Baltimore so that they would have unrestricted access to his vast collection of medical literature. In his will, Dr. Osler left the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, his collection of more than 8000 texts, to McGill University. This collection currently makes up the nucleus of the Osler Library at McGill, where the ashes of Sir William Osler and Lady Osler now lie.

Sir William Osler was an extraordinary physician throughout his professional life. It is, however, Dr. Osler's legacy as an educator that continues to endure and impact the teaching of medical students to this day.

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