

Title

Sir William Osler's 'Influences' for the successful physician, a reappraisal after 126 years.

Running Title

Osler's influences.

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Abstract.

Background. The vertiginous pace with which modern medicine advances, can seem overwhelming to students and young doctors

Aim of the study. To reappraise an oration by William Osler delivered to medical students at the point of their graduation

Methods. Narrative review.

Results. Osler emphasised the Art of Detachment, the Virtue of Method, the Quality of Thoroughness and the Grace of Humility, which he considers the basic pillars on which a successful medical practice is achieved, Osler's words serve as a guiding light for physicians struggling with the demands of twenty first century medicine

Keywords.

“William Osler”, “Aequanimitas”, “Teacher and Student”, “Philosophy of Medicine”.

Introduction

In 1892, Sir William Osler delivered a speech titled “Teacher and Student”, to University of Minnesota students on their graduation [1]. In his talk he spoke of the ‘influences’ required for success in medicine: *the Art of Detachment, the Virtue of Method, the Quality of Thoroughness and the Grace of Humility*. It was included in *Aequanimitas*, and although 126 years have passed since its publication [2], his words are still applicable today.

The Art of Detachment.

*“In the first place, acquire early the **Art of Detachment**, by which I mean the faculty of isolating yourselves from the pursuits and pleasures incident to youth.” [3]*

Medical apprenticeship is a long and winding road that requires self-sacrifice and discipline . If one does not learn something new and instructive every day then the physician is not carrying out his job well. A doctor needs to love his fellow man but develop a carapace that allows clinical decision making to be free from excessive emotional engagement.

The Virtue of Method

*“Ask any active business man or a leader in a profession the secret which enables him to accomplish much work, and he will reply in one word, system; or as I shall term it, the **Virtue of Method**, the harness without which only the horses of genius travel.” [3]*

The second influence, is a two-tier, the secret of the high-achiever: a systematized *Way of Life*, Osler would write later [4]. A systematized history-taking and physical examination method;

only through practice and repetition the physician will achieve mastery. Afterwards, he reminds us that “*medicine is an art, based on science*”, and that we are to document things as they are, not as we think they should be. He warns us achieving this has a price, because it “*lays bare our weakness*”, leaving us, sometimes as mere spectators, without any possibility to intervene. To paraphrase Ramón y Cajal, “*the intellect is only useful when limited to observe, describe, compare and classify the phenomena marching before the sensory organs*” [5]. Osler’s recommendation is straightforward: to be successful, the doctor needs be systematic in thought, clinical skills, and life in general.

The Quality of Thoroughness.

“*And thirdly add to the Virtue of Method, the **Quality of Thoroughness**. (...) A knowledge of the fundamental sciences upon which our art is based (...) not a smattering, but a full and deep acquaintance, not with all the facts, that is impossible, but with the great principles based upon them.*” [3]

The acquisition of knowledge in the art we are trying to master, Osler clarifies, learning all the facts is an *ignis fatuus*, we must learn the fundamental principles, the pillars on which a particular discipline rests. And also the history of the profession, to see the ‘big picture’: how breakthroughs were made, often when the field seemed static; and to acknowledge tools available today were only dreamt of in the past. We complement this by following the paths of our mentors—sometimes walking along with them and gaining in experience. The physician needs to evaluate new advances but when their value is confirmed embrace them and use them to the benefit of patients.

The Grace of Humility.

*“The Art of Detachment, the Virtue of Method, and the Quality of Thoroughness may make you students, in the true sense of the word, successful practitioners, or even great investigators; but your characters may still lack that which can alone give permanence to powers—the **Grace of Humility.**” [3]*

At the end, Osler guards us against hubris. The first three influences might make us better physicians, but only through humbleness we are completed. Then Osler instructs us to hold the truth as something sacred, but difficult to find:

“Start out with the conviction that absolute truth is hard to reach in matters relating to our fellow creatures, healthy or diseased, that slips in observation are inevitable even with the best trained faculties, that errors in judgement must occur in the practice of an art which consists largely in balancing probabilities.” [3]

This Osler relates to humbleness by acknowledging our own fallibility, recognizing our defects, we are able to be sympathetic with the mistakes of others, and ‘*allow one eye for what is laudable in them*’.

Nothing is certain in medicine except that we all die. Decisions are made on the balance of probabilities and depend on careful observation, experience and imagination. Mistakes are inevitable and should be openly discussed. Yet, this is, in no means an apology for mistakes in medicine, because “*you will draw from your errors the very lessons which may enable you to avoid*

their repetition.”; let us remind the words of Dr. Horacio Jinich: “*The error is inevitable, as it is part of human nature. To err is human. But error can be reduce at a minimum if scientific discipline is rigorously applied. [6].*”

Final remarks.

May we not forget these influences, for they represent words of wisdom in an ever more complex everyday practice, not unknown to Osler, as he traversed winding roads, to emerge as one of the central figures of clinical medicine.

Further Reading.

To those interested in the life of Sir William Osler, we recommend the biography by Michael Bliss “William Osler: A Life in Medicine” (Oxford University Press, 1999).

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