



WILLIAM OSLER : THE VISIONARY WHO SHAPED MODERN MEDICAL PEDAGOGY

Oncology

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ABSTRACT

Sir William Osler, 1st Baronet (July 12, 1849 - December 29, 1919) was a pioneer in the field of medicine with humble beginnings in a small West Canadian village. He would later go on to have an illustrious career spanning across 5 decades at some of the most prestigious medical institutes in the current era. He is rightly regarded as the 'Father of Modern Medicine' for shaping the modern medical educational and organisational structure. Sir William Osler, born in Canada was a pioneer in the field of medicine whose works transcends various domains of the field. His meteoric rise to the pinnacle of medicine was down to his obsession to learn - a true bibliophile. A fascinating career that spans across 5 decades and the setting up of illustrious institutions in North America and Europe. The modern structure of medical education was shaped in his vision and this is testament to his genius. This article chronicles his story from a small town in West Canada to Oxford University, leaving behind an ever lasting legacy like no other.

KEYWORDS

William Osler, American Association of Physicians, John Hopkins university, Residency system, Father of Modern Medicine

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Sir William Osler, 1st Baronet (July 12, 1849 - December 29, 1919) was born in Bond Head, Canada West. This short review of his illustrious career is to commemorate his 175th birth anniversary year. He was born to parents who would encourage him to join the ministry [1]. He thus entered Trinity college at the University of Toronto - a decision that would change the direction of medical science forever. It is here that he met James Bovell and William Arthur Johnson - 2 fellow Canadians who had great interest in medicine [2].

He soon switched his career and enrolled in the Toronto School of Medicine. Deeply fascinated by the works of eminent writers like Sir Thomas Browne (author of *Religio Medici*), he would spend several hours reading medical books at the university library. Osler left the Toronto School of Medicine after being accepted into the MDCM program at McGill University Faculty of Medicine in Montreal. He received his medical degree in 1872 [1]. He would later will his entire library of books to McGill university (presently renamed as Osler Library of the History of Medicine).

Osler, like many famous persons, was a man at the right place at the right time (Figure 1). He would start establishing himself at a time when medicine, especially in North America, was basing itself on scientific rationale rather than traditional rituals (as was the practice in Europe at the time) [3]. He would return to McGill University as a professor in 1874 following his post graduate training under Rudolf Virchow. What set Osler apart from his peers was the constant desire to read - a practice he would often encourage his pupils.

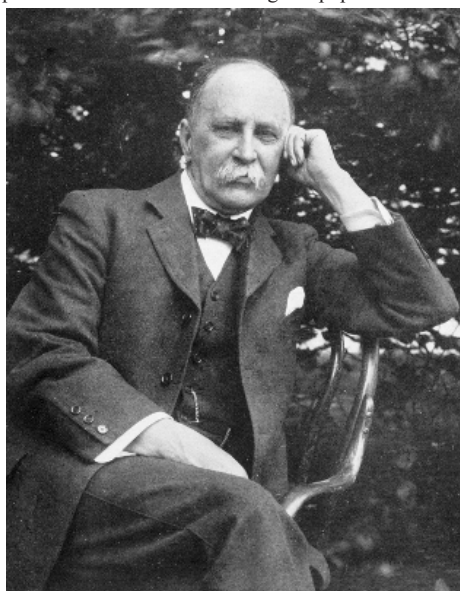


Figure 1 - Osler in 1912

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Review

Early Career - Laying The Foundations.

Following his return as professor to McGill University, Osler understood the importance of pathology in the understanding of a disease process. He started the first formal Journal Club which used to discuss topics on veterinary pathology. Noting his potential, he was appointed by the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia in 1884 as Chair of Clinical medicine. He quickly enhanced his reputation as a clinician, humanitarian and mentor. Due to his sharp clinical skills and excellent mentorship qualities he would connect strongly with his students through various essays and other literary articles. He would often tell his students "Listen to your patient, he is telling you the diagnosis", emphasizing the importance of a good history taking [4].

He was one of the founding members of the Association of American Physicians - with the aim of advancing scientific and practical medicine. This paved the way for the establishment of several such societies which currently shape the medical fraternity. When he left Philadelphia in 1889 he delivered the famous farewell address that would underscore the importance of imperturbability (calm amid storm) and equanimity (moderated emotions) - the 2 key traits necessary for a physician.

John Hopkins - Setting up the modern medical education structure.

In 1889 Osler became the first physician-in-chief of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Within a span of 4 years he played an instrumental role in setting up the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. He became one of the school's first professors of medicine - alongside William Henry Welch, William Steward Halstead and Howard Kelly ("The Big Four"), and picked up from where he had left off at Philadelphia.

Osler stuck to his belief that medical education was never meant to confine itself to books alone and set up the residency and clerkship systems. The residency system demanded a full time sleep-in work culture whereby the physicians would live in the hospital building. The long work hours in a day was coupled with several years of training which meant the trainees led a restricted life. The pyramidal structure of the system meant that there were many interns, fewer assistants and one chief resident. The other idea that Osler brought in was Clerkship - wherein medical students would spend time with patients in the wards often attending rounds and performing laboratory tests. The students spent fewer hours in lecture halls and more time engaging in patient related activities.

He delivered lectures or arranged for discussions on topics varying from hematology to abdominal tumors - all of which were well ahead of his time (Figure 2). Despite being such an astute academician he found time for administrative works and Osler presided over the expansion of The Johns Hopkins Hospital [5].

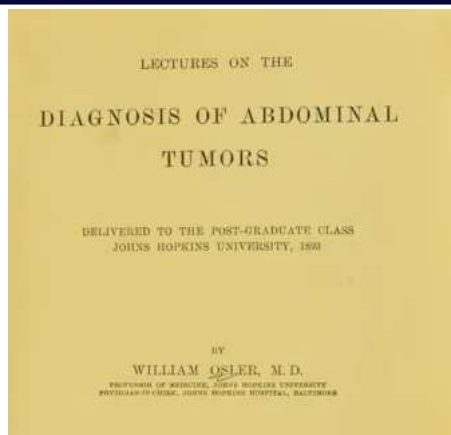


Figure 2 - 'Lectures on the Diagnosis of Abdominal Tumors' by William Osler.

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Oxford - The Lasting Legacy

In 1905 he was appointed the Regius professor at Oxford, a post he held until his death (Figure 3). His work in Europe paralleled his work in North America. In 1907 He initiated the founding of the Association of Physicians and its publication Quarterly Journal of Medicine [6]. In 1911 he founded the Postgraduate Medical Association and became its first president - the same year he was named a baronet for his contribution to medicine. He also championed the cause of establishment of libraries which finally bore fruit in the form of setting up of the Medical Library Association of Great Britain and Ireland.



Figure 3 - William Osler holding open Sir William Stirling Maxwell's Copy of Vesal's 'Tabulae Anatomicae' at the Oxford Bodleian Library.

Credits - Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/williamoslerman00cush> on August 6th, 2024.

Osler was fond of gerontology and would often involve quotes or excerpts from this field in his speeches. He gave the 'Fixed period' speech when leaving Hopkins for Oxford which referred to the concepts of euthanasia in the older age. In the third edition of his most notable work "The Principles and Practices of Medicine" Osler describes pneumonia as "the friend of the aged" as it facilitated a relatively painless passing of the elderly. That Osler himself succumbed to pneumonia at the age of seventy remains a glaring example of how farsighted he was at the time.

CONCLUSION

Osler was a visionary who married clinical, administrative and organisational skills with exceptional ease and perfection. His influence can be felt in almost every aspect of medicine from quotable quotes to the modern day structure of medical teaching and the current establishments of various specialist societies. The art of publishing and discussing them in scientific society is so mundane these days that one could be forgiven for not knowing that such practices were established in his days.

The work of geniuses transcend time and influence scores of academicians across generations. Countless works have been written about his life by accomplished physicians like Harvey Cushing who received the Pulitzer Prize for the same in 1926 [7]. Sir William Osler is rightly regarded as the 'Father of Modern Medicine' since the impact of his work (or life) is unmatched in the field of medicine.

Summary

This is an article that captures the incredible journey of Sir William Osler. The various institutes he worked in and the reforms he brought about which changed medical education forever is highlighted.

Conflict Of Interest

The Author declares no conflict of interest.

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