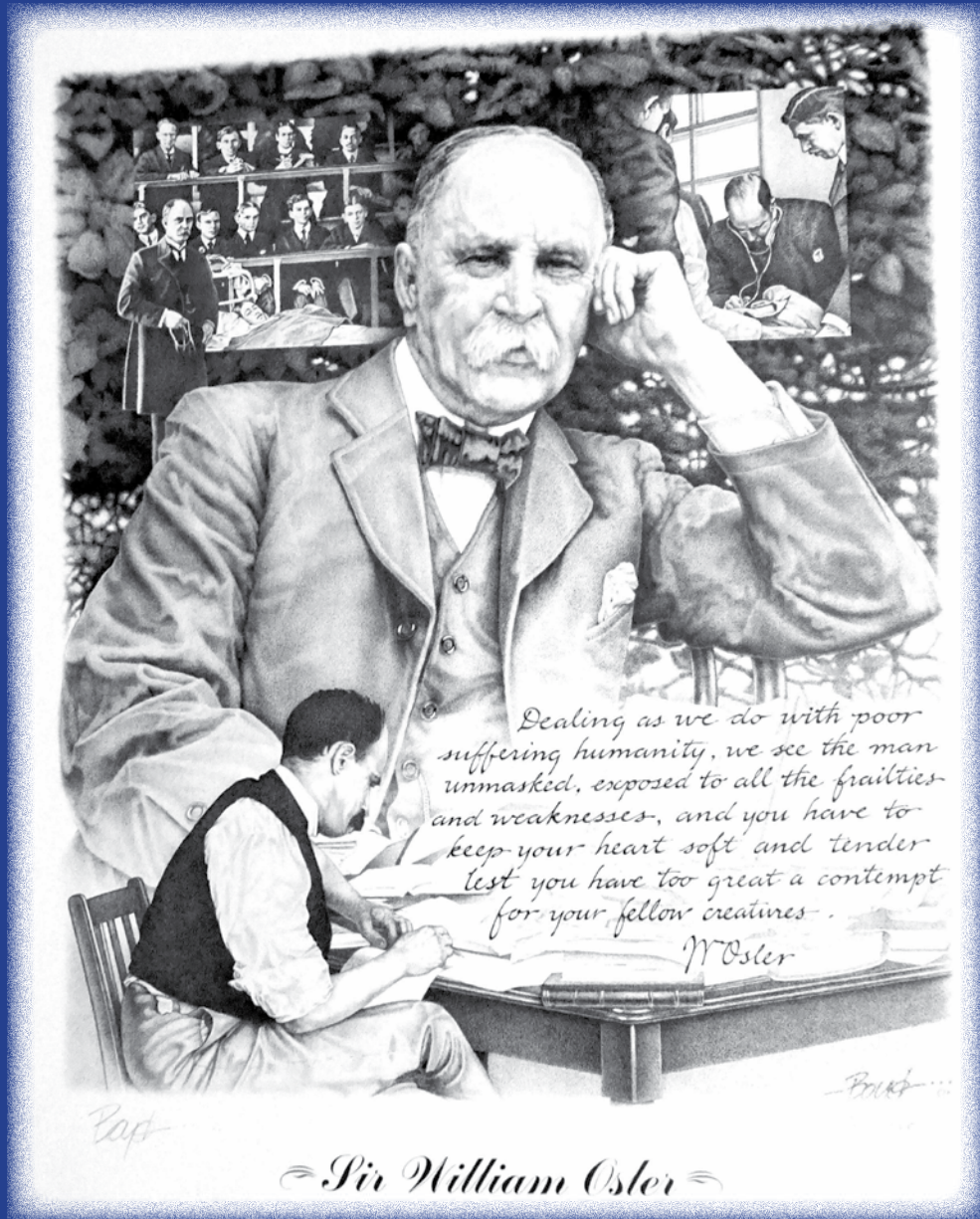


Musings on Osler misquoted



Sir William Osler collage. Illustration by Brian Boyd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

David J. Elpern, MD

Dr. Elpern is a dermatologist in private practice in Williamstown, MA.

Several years ago, at a continuing medical education lecture by a renowned medical historian, there was a slide presented that read, “To Cure Sometimes, To Relieve Often, To Comfort Always. Sir William Osler.” This is a favorite quotation of mine; however, its origin is actually from medieval France, “*Gureir Quelquefois, Soulager Souvent, Consoler Toujours.*” This folk saying, dates to the 15th century or earlier and is inscribed on the statue of Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau at Saranac Lake, New York. Trudeau, was a contemporary of Osler as they were born just a year apart. When trying to inform the speaker of the history of this quote, he said, “Perhaps, the quote should have been Osler’s.”

Another quote attributed to Osler, “It is much more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease the patient has,” may be considered the *bon mot* of humane medicine letters having appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine*,¹ *The Pharos*,² and *Global Pulse –AMSA*.³

The primary source for this quote is not given, although one article references it to Robert B. Taylor, in his book *White Coat Tales*.⁴ The saying sounds like it could be Osler; but is it? It is not in *Counsels and Ideals & Selected Aphorisms*,⁵ *Aequanimitas*,⁶ nor does Google attribute it to him.

The authors of three articles citing this quote were asked where in Osler’s writing this occurred, and their response was that they had lifted the quote from secondary sources.

Lily Szczygiel, Public Services Assistant at McGill’s Osler Library of the History of Medicine shared:

This particular quotation has come up many times but we have been unable to locate it. Here are two suggestions for similar quotations and they are found in the book entitled *The Quotable Osler*, edited by Mark E. Silverman, T. Jock Murray and Charles S. Bryan, Philadelphia: American College of Physicians, c2008.”

1. Pg. 43, #124, “Care more particularly for the individual patient than for the special features of the disease,”⁷ derived from an address to the students of the Albany Medical College in the journal *Albany Medical Annals*, v. 20, 1899, pgs. 307-309.

2. Pg. 190, #577, “Every patient you see is a lesson in much more than the malady from which he suffers,”⁷ from an address entitled, “The Student Life” in *Aequanimitas, With Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*, 3rd ed., Philadelphia: P. Blakiston’s Son, 1932, pg. 406.

This is clearly an important concept, but the quote is not Osler’s.

Dr. Tamar Hoffmann has shared a quote attributed to Moses Maimonides (1135–1204):

One should never say: “This disease is like that [other] one.”⁷ ...Nor should one say: “I have seen how my elders have treated [this disease] in such or such way.” A physician does not treat a disease, he rather treats a sick person.

This aphorism, that seems genuine, has been embraced by Maimonides Medical Center, Brooklyn, New York, which states on its website:

It was he [Maimonides] who said, “The physician should not treat the disease, but rather the patient who is suffering from it.” At Maimonides Medical Center, we have practiced our namesake’s philosophy with an unmatched passion for more than 100 years.⁸

Similarly, Plato said:

The slave doctor prescribes what mere experience suggests, as if he had exact knowledge; and when he has given his orders, like a tyrant, he rushes off with equal assurance to some other servant who is ill...

But the other doctor, who is a freeman, attends and practices upon freemen; and he carries his enquiries far back, and goes into the nature of the disorder; he enters into discourse with the patient and with his friends, and is at once getting information from the sick man, and also instructing him as far as he is able, and he will not prescribe for him until he has first convinced him; at last, when he has brought the patient more and more under his persuasive influences and set him on the road to health, he attempts to effect a cure.⁹

Another quote ascribed to Osler for which the primary source is obscure is, “The good physician treats the

disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.” Is it Osler or is it apocryphal? Recently, it appeared as the running head of an article by Jeremiah Baroness (AQA, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1949), in this *The Pharos*.¹⁰

Asking Dr. Baroness where he found the Osler quote, he affably replied:

I have no idea where the quote arose; in fact I don't care for it very much—it's simplistic and I think it doesn't sound particularly Oslerian. The core idea—that the patient's illness experience must be addressed in addition to his/her disease, is fundamental to the physician's responsibilities.

Osler said and wrote many brilliant and memorable things about being a physician and about patient care. His memory is not honored by ascribing simplistic aphorisms to him. Harvey Cushing (AQA, Harvard Medical School, 1914) in his 1926 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *The Life of Sir William Osler*, published seven years after Osler's death, has gathered many anecdotes of the great physician with patients both humble and privileged.¹¹

A vignette of Osler on the Hopkins wards circa 1899, provides a more vivid picture of Osler, the humanistic physician, than the oft-quoted counterfeit aphorisms:

A bedside incident reported by Dr. Joseph Walsh, Spring 1899, Johns Hopkins Hospital:

She was an old woman of 75 in hospital for acute rheumatism, who also showed a wind tumor of the Steno's duct the size of a walnut, which she could inflate and deflate at pleasure. Osler said it was the second one he had seen. Both of these conditions, however, were incidental to her general history.

Osler said, “I would like you to tell Dr. Walsh something about your past life. When were you first in hospital?”

“At 27. I had a sarcoma of the right knee.”

“What did they do for it?”

“They cut off the right leg at the hip.”

“Did you get entirely well?”

“Yes, entirely well.”

“When were you in again?”

“At 42. I had cancer of the breast. They cut off the left breast and the left arm.”

“Did you get entirely well?”

“Yes, entirely well.”

“What are you in the hospital for now?”

“For rheumatism,” she said with tears in her voice and catching his hand, “I hope you will make me well in a hurry, because I have to go home to take care of my grandchildren.”¹¹

Cushing commented, “Osler, in short, never forgot the patient in his interest in the malady. There was a tradition among the clinical clerks that if you want to see the Chief at his best watch him as he passes the bedside of some poor old soul with a chronic and hopeless malady—they always get his best.”¹¹

This anecdote demonstrates that Osler, the great physician, who (as Maimonides advised) “treated the person with the disease,” took the time to know his patients, and was not just focused on the pathologies they had.

On January 2, 2020, an Amazon algorithm targeted me as an Osler aficionado, and, unbidden, sent me an email offering for a “William Osler quotes fridge magnet, Black by PhotoMagnets Price: \$4.95 & FREE Shipping.” This transformed Osler's sublime life and lessons into kitchen kitsch.

Little does Amazon know, or care, that Osler's quotes have been making the rounds in scholarly medical journals for decades. Now, Osler's good name is being exploited on the electronic marketplace to adorn refrigerator doors. Egerton Yorick Davis, Osler's mischevious alter ego, would have been amused.

So what is the provenance of “It is more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease the patient has,” or “The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease?” Osler, Maimonides, Plato, Hippocrates? These are all members of the Academy of the Immortals.¹² It may never be known who said what. So much has been lost in translation. It is clear that Osler walked this walk—in Montreal, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Oxford. Whether these are his words or someone else's, his life remains an inspiration for physicians and trainees in the 21st century.

A query of PubMed to see what has been written about aphoristic misattributions revealed nothing useful. One of the few hits was a perceptive essay about how physicians can misjudge patients.¹³ While it had nothing about the accuracy of adages, it did offer this musing from Jay Baruch:

I'm reminded of this oft-quoted aphorism from Sir William Osler: "The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." It's cited by medical educators as an invocation to never forget the humanistic heart at the center of clinical care.¹³

Most contributors to literature are passionately devoted to evidence-based medicine and scientific facts, yet, when it comes to crediting enlightened predecessors, there is indifferent silence. The novelist Robertson Davies addresses this disconnect in an obscure, but brilliant, essay, "Can a Doctor be a Humanist?"¹⁴ Davies explains his thesis by discussing the allegory of the caduceus, the ancient symbol of the medical profession. The legend holds that the god thrust his staff between two warring serpents, representing science/knowledge and humanism/wisdom, who "curled around it, forever in contention, but held in a mutuality of power by the reconciling staff. Davies explains:

[W]isdom is an introverted element in the doctor's psyche. It has its origin within and it is what makes him look not at the disease, but at the bearer of the disease. It is what creates the link that unites the healer to the patient, and the exercise of which makes him a true physician...¹⁴

Clearly, medicine today favors the snake of science and ignores wisdom's snake at the patient's and physician's own peril. Being careless with attributions of wisdom's sources is expressing an indifference to its import. Presciently, Davies did not attribute the aphorism to his fellow Canadian, Osler. As guardians of the caduceus, the staff that keeps science and wisdom in balance, physicians need to treat wisdom's snake with the same devotion and respect as the snake of science.

References:

1. Kahn MW. What Would Osler Do? Learning from "Difficult" Patients. *N Engl J Med*. 2009; 361: 442–3.
2. Ratanawongsa N, Rand CS, Magill CF, Hayashi J, et al. Teaching Residents to Know Their Patients as Individuals. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc*. Summer 2009; 72(3): 4–11.

3. Roussel L. The Ray of Light: Remembering the Poor in Pre-Clinical Years. *American Medical Student's Association Global Pulse International Health Journal*. Spring 2009; 5(1).
4. Taylor RB. *White Coat Tales: Medicine's Heroes, Heritage, and Misadventures*. New York: Springer Publishing; 2008.
5. Osler W. *Counsels and Ideals from the Writings of William Osler and Selected Aphorisms*. Birmingham (AL): The Classics of Medicine Library: Gryphon Editions; 1985.
6. Osler W. *Aequanimitas: With other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*. Third Edition. Philadelphia: Blakiston Company; 1947.
7. Maimonides M. In: *The Book on Asthma*. Muntner S, editor. Jerusalem: Rubin Mass; 1940. p. 41.
8. Maimonides Medical Center. *Our History and Future*. <https://www.maimonidesmed.org/about-us/history-future/past-present-future>.
9. Plato. *Laws*. Jowett B, translator. Gutenberg.org. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1750/1750-h/1750-h.htm#link2H_4_0007.
10. Barondess JA. Tobias Venner: A 17th Century Oslerian Prototype. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc*. Autumn 2019; 82(4) 8–12.
11. Cushing H. *The Life of Sir William Osler Complete in One Volume*. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press; 1940.
12. Osler W. *An Alabama Student*. Baltimore: The Friedenwald Company; 1896.
13. Baruch J. Why Won't My Patient Act Like a Jerk? *The Hastings Cent Rep*. 2019; 49(6): 4–5.
14. Davies R. Can a Doctor Be a Humanist? In: *The Merry Life: Reflections on Reading, Writing, and the World of Books*. New York: Penguin Books; 1998.

The author's E-mail address is djelpern@gmail.com.

Editor's note: The Osler quote that accompanies Dr. Barondess' article in *The Pharos*¹⁰ is widely found in print, online books and websites dedicated to Osler. The editors sourced this quote from the "Closer to Osler" portion of Johns Hopkins Medicine, https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/publications/hopkins_medicine_magazine/circling_the_dome/spring-summer-2018/closer-to-osler.