

Osler, the Towering Genius who Disdained a Beaten Path

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Sir William Osler, born on 12th July 1849 and died on 29th December 1919, is often called the 'Father of Modern Medicine'. Born and raised in Canada, he graduated from McGill University and took up important posts in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Oxford. He left his mark on all these places and so in the centenary of this death, he is commemorated widely for his legacy to the practice of medicine and the training of medical doctors. The Postgraduate Medical Journal is proud to dedicate the current issue to the memory of the great man.

No less than Harvey Cushing, the Father of Neurosurgery who first described Cushing's disease, wrote a three-volume biography of Osler that won a Pulitzer Prize. I would therefore not endeavour to describe his life. Nevertheless, I can't resist pointing out that he had studied with Rudolf Virchow, the Father of Modern Pathology, who kindled his interest in the mechanisms of diseases and the studying such mechanisms in animals.

His clinical prowess hardly needs mentioning. He is by far the most quoted physicians. Generations of medical students would have come across his aphorisms such as 'He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all'; 'Listen to your patient, he is telling you the diagnosis'; and 'If it were not for the great variability among individuals, medicine might as well be a science, not an art'.

These serve to highlight his emphasis on learning from patients and learning on the wards. This pioneering form of teaching is still enshrined in the teaching of most medical schools and in most postgraduate training programmes.

Many buildings on both sides of the Atlantic are named after him. He had also described numerous original observations that bear his name. Every medical student has heard of Osler's nodes although hardly anyone has seen one. Most postgraduates would have heard of Osler-Rendu-Weber syndrome (hereditary telangiectasia), but I doubt if many are aware that lupus endocarditis is also known as Osler-Libman-Sacks syndrome.

In modern times, we require doctors to be competent and safe, good in knowledge and skills, and excellent at communication with patients and colleagues. Sometimes, we even worry about a doctor's integrity. In a farewell address titled 'Aequanimitas' in 1889, Osler thought that equanimity and imperturbability were essential qualities for physicians. In outlining his lofty vision of the ideal doctor, Osler was way ahead of the times. But then, Osler was a giant who could see further than most of us.