



# Medicine for Managers

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## Sir William Osler

**William Osler (1849-1919), Canadian physician, is known as “The Father of Modern Medicine”. Yet, many outside medicine will never have heard of him. He was one of the most influential figures in the development of modern medicine, because of his vision, particularly in the development of medical education and his colourful personality. He produced some of the most celebrated and enduring quotes about medical practice to this day.**

**O**sler was born in Ontario, Canada in 1849, the son of a Church of England minister, and whose great Grandfather was believed by many to have been a pirate.

In 1867 Osler entered the University of Toronto to study divinity but he switched to medicine as he developed an increasing interest in medical science. He moved from Toronto to McGill University Faculty of Medicine in Montreal, achieving his MD in 1872.

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*Osler would come to be known, not only for his medical prowess, but for his wicked sense of humour and for his profound and enduring quotations.*

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After a period of postgraduate study in Germany, he returned to McGill as professor in 1874. His prowess in medicine was recognised when, in 1883, he was elected Fellow of the

British Royal College of Physicians. In 1884 he was appointed Professor of Clinical Medicine at Pennsylvania University and the following year was a founding member of the Association of American Physicians.

In 1888, Osler was recruited to Johns Hopkins University to be physician-in-chief of the newly established Johns Hopkins Hospital and professor of medicine at the school.

It was in this role that Osler would have his greatest impact on the development of medicine by shaping the way in which medicine was taught to the students.

Osler organised and pioneered clinical instruction **at the bedside** of the patient. He formulated the concept of **clinical clerkships** with third and fourth year medical students working on the wards with patients.

He insisted that students interacted with patients at all levels from their early clinical training so that they quickly learned to take **medical histories**, undertake **full examinations**

of patients and carry out **laboratory tests** involving the examination of samples of secretions, blood, urine and faeces. He recognised that **textbook learning, though useful, was no substitute for clinical interaction** and the “incomparability of thorough physical examination”. He said that he hoped his epitaph would say *“He brought medical students into the wards for bedside teaching”*

Another quotation on the subject was:

*“He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all”*

Perhaps his best known sayings, forgotten at any doctor’s peril, were:

*“Listen to your patient; he is telling you the diagnosis”*

and

*“It is much more important to know what sort of a patient has a disease than what sort of a disease a patient has”*

Johns Hopkins Hospital flourished under his stewardship and in 1905 he was invited to become, and accepted the Regis Professorship of Medicine at Oxford University, which was then and remains a most prestigious medical appointment.

He held the post until his death in 1919 at the age of 70. At Oxford he continued to drive the development of medical education centred around the patient and emphasising the importance of interaction to see, hear and

touch the diseases to understand their genesis, nature and the developing treatments available for them.

He courted controversy throughout his clinical life. In the third edition of his Textbook, “The Principles and Practice of Medicine”, which was published until 2001 in many languages, he described pneumonia as

*“the friend of the aged”.*

He continued that it allowed the elderly a quick, comparatively painless death:

*“Taken off by it in an acute, short and not often painful illness, the old man escapes those ‘cold gradations of decay’ so distressing to himself and his friends”*

Coincidentally, Osler died of pneumonia, as a complication of bronchiectasis, during the Spanish ‘Flu epidemic of 1919.

Osler’s name lives on in medicine because of the diseases, signs and symptoms to which his name is attached, including

- Osler’s sign – raised blood pressure due to atherosclerosis
- Osler’s nodes – tender nodules on the pulps of the fingers and toes due to subacute bacterial endocarditis

And diseases

- Osler-Weber-Rendu disease
- Osler-Vaquez disease
- Osler-Libman-Sacks syndrome
- Osler’s syndrome
- Osler’s triad

Overall, Osler contributed hugely to the training and delivery of medicine and modern healthcare forgets his principles at its peril.

### **PERSONAL OPINION**

**S**ir William Osler was **visionary**. He moved medicine from the lecture room to the patient, hugely improving medical education and standards.

*He emphasised the importance of putting the patient at the centre of all care.*

*He highlighted the need to look, listen and examine the patient.*

*That advice is equally important today, but it seems that we are witnessing a steady decline in those basic principles amongst some GPs who are now not personally examining their patients, increasingly delegating, consulting by telephone or electronically, providing fewer services, and failing to visit.*

*The art of medical practise is therefore declining and in particular the empathy vital in establishing good professional relationships seems to be disappearing.*

*I concur with Osler that the patient must be the centre of the diagnosis and support through illness, and failure of clinical assessment and delegation of care in many cases is to the detriment of the patient themselves.*

*I acknowledge that there are arguments used for the changes (time saving, control of demand, substitution of technology, etc.) but mercifully these comments do not apply to all GPs and many still provide 'Oslerian' standards.*

*I suspect that Osler might, to repeat his well-known quote, still see as vital his approach and would remind us all to:*

*"Listen to your Patient; he is telling you the diagnosis"*

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