

The Prudent Prescriber

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Sir William Osler: His Pharma Insights of 150 Years Ago Still Shine Today

It is fitting in 2019, the 100th anniversary of Osler's death to remember the breadth of this native Canadian's contribution to medicine and the world.

William Osler was born in the hamlet of Bond Head, Canada West, forty miles north of Toronto. His parents had come from England to serve the Anglican Church. His English ancestors were sailors (one a pirate?), shopkeepers and more contemporaneously preachers and a physician uncle. After a year, he dropped out of the seminary to attend the Toronto School of Medicine. Following post-graduate training under Rudolf Virchow in Europe, Osler returned to the McGill University Faculty of Medicine as a professor in 1874. In 1884, he was appointed Chair of Clinical Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

In 1889, he accepted the position as the first Physician-in-Chief of the new Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. (There were very few rats in Baltimore at that time, but Osler led an effort to end a typhoid fever epidemic.) Shortly afterwards, in 1893, he was instrumental in the creation of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and became one of the school's first professors of medicine. In 1905, he was appointed to the Regius Chair of Medicine at Oxford, which he held until his death.

Pharm Reps \neq Rational Prescribing

(PR)



(RP)

**Antibiotics do
NOT**

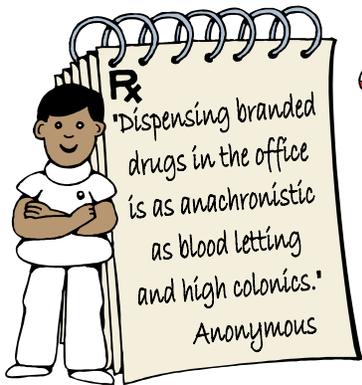


**help
acute bronchitis**

**β -blockers in
post-MI
save
lives**



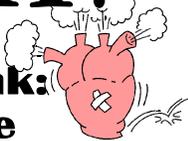
**Pill splitters save
BIG**



CHE?

Think:

- Ace**
- Aldactone**
- B-blocker**
- Dig**
- Diuretic**



**Avoid these expensive
"me-too" drugs:**



- Intermezzo
- Vimovo
- Livalo
- Gralise
- Viibryd
- Edarbi
- Daliresp



**Treat patients
> 60 years to 150/90**



NOW AVAILABLE
ON THE
GENERIC MARQUEE

Advair \rightarrow fluticasone/salmeterol
or Wixela Inhub
Viagra \rightarrow sildenafil
Uceris \rightarrow budesonide ER
Suboxone \rightarrow buprenorphine/naloxone

Perhaps Osler's greatest influence on medicine was to insist that students learn from seeing and talking to patients. His The Principles and Practice of Medicine first published in 1892, was the first great textbook of modern medicine. It dominated its market for several decades. It also proved to be the last text in which a single author dared to write on the whole range of the body's internal ills.

My introduction to Osler's wisdom came during residency when we studied Aequanimitas—his call for imperturbability.

“In the first place, in the physician or surgeon, no quality takes rank with imperturbability... Imperturbability means coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, clearness of judgment in moments of great peril, immobility, impassiveness...”

More recently, my delight in Osler has come from his aphorisms and bon mots regarding drugs, doctors, patients and the pharmaceutical industry.

Osler's perception of man's affinity for medicines...

“Man has an inborn craving for medicine. Heroic dosing for several generations has given his tissues a thirst for drugs. The desire to take medicine is one feature which distinguishes man, the animal, from his fellow creatures.”
(TEACHING AND THINKING, IN AEQUANIMITAS)

And his view of man's capacity for self-deception regarding drugs...

“The blind faith which some men have in medicines illustrates too often the greatest of all human capacities—the capacity for self-deception.” (THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE. CAN LANCET 1909; 42: 899-912.)

In response to man's desire for and self-deception regarding medicines, Sir William recommends that physicians become health educators,

“One of the first duties of the physician is to educate the masses not to take medicines.” (BEAN WB. SIR WILLIAM OSLER APHORISMS, 105.)

A significant portion of the skepticism that I promulgate in this newsletter has been gleaned from Osler's views on medications,

“While on the one hand I would encourage you with the firmest faith in a few drugs; on the other hand I would urge you to cultivate a keenly skeptical attitude towards the pharmacopeia as a whole, remembering the shrewd remark of Benjamin Franklin, that “he is the best doctor who knows the worthlessness of the most medicines.””
(THE RESERVES OF LIFE. ST MARYS HOSPITAL GAZ 1907; 13:95–98.)

In his era where most medicines were placebos at best, Dr. Osler got it right,

“If many drugs are used for a disease, all are insufficient.” (BEAN WB. SIR WILLIAM OSLER APHORISMS, 105.)
His wisdom still holds today.

For several years I have misattributed, “Use new drugs quickly while they still work” to Osler. Actually these words belong to Armand Trousseau. Osler was more poetic about new drugs...

“Do not rashly use every new product of which the peripatetic siren sings. Consider what surprising reactions may occur in the laboratory from the careless mixing of unknown substances.” (THAYER, WS. OSLER THE TEACHER, IN OSLER AND OTHER PAPERS,3.)

and

“Remember how much you do not know. Do not pour strange medicines into your patients.” (THAYER, WS. OSLER THE TEACHER, IN OSLER AND OTHER PAPERS,3.)

And again, Sir William makes the case that is heard today, “Don't prescribe a drug that has not been on the market for seven years” and “Let your colleagues experiment with the new drugs on their patients.”

“In therapeutics we do not so much need new remedies as a fuller knowledge of when and how to use the old ones.”
(ON THE USE OF ARSENIC IN CERTAIN FORMS OF ANAEMIA.THERAPEUTIC GAZ (Detroit) 1886; 2:741– 6.)

and

“The young physician starts life with 20 drugs for each disease, the old physician ends life with one drug for 20 diseases.” (BEAN WB. SIR WILLIAM OSLER APHORISMS, 122.)

Finally, let's talk Big Pharma! 110 years ago, Sir William Osler lamented the commercial promotion of drugs, decrying the pharmaceutical industry's role in clinical medicine.

“I would protest against the usurpation on the part of these men (purveyors of pharmaceuticals) of our function as teachers.... What right have Z and Company to send out a card directions for the treatment of anemia and dyspepsia, about which subjects they know as much as a newborn babe...” **“For years the profession has been exploited in this way until the evil has become unbearable.”**

“Far too large a section of the treatment of disease is today controlled by the big manufacturing pharmacists, who have enslaved us in a plausible pseudoscience. (THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE. CAN LANCET 1909; 42: 899-912.)

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