

BOOK REVIEW

Osler: quote unquote

SAMEER R RAO*, SANJAY A PAI**

*Consultant Cardiothoracic Surgeon, **Consultant Pathologist, Manipal Heart Foundation, Bangalore 560017, India. e-mail: sameerrao@hotmail.com, s_pai@vsnl.com

The quotable Osler. Eds: Mark E Silverman, T Jock Murray, Charles S Bryan Philadelphia: American College of Physicians, 2003. pp 283. ISBN 1-9305-1334-8

More has been written about Sir William Osler (1849–1919) than about any other physician, including probably Hippocrates. Called ‘the best doctor of all time’ some years after his death by *JAMA*, he inspired medical students and doctors in Europe and North America where he practised medicine, and continues to do so all over the world even today, over 80 years after his death. He was a mentor to numerous physicians and surgeons, many of whom were to achieve fame in their professional lives. Osler societies and clubs all over the world as well as numerous articles and books on the man stand testimony to this.

Osler was particularly well known for his humanist approach to medical practice. He left behind a rich legacy of more than 1,600 writings covering medical, philosophical, educational and historical papers, essays and books. Among the numerous reasons Osler remains relevant today, is his principled stand on many things.

The quotable Osler is a compilation of many of Osler’s quotations and sayings that cover the broad field of medical practice and life outside the profession. The book also includes a short biographical sketch of the man by Richard L Golden (modified from an earlier article that appeared in *JAMA*), which should be informative to both Oslerolators as well as students who are new to the subject. We learn, for instance, from the article that 1,50,000 copies of *Aequanimitas and other essays* by Osler were distributed to medical students by the Eli Lilly Co. between 1932 and 1953.

Osler’s aphorisms (812 of them) are organised by topics such as personal qualities, the art and practice of medicine, the medical profession, diagnosis, etc. A thorough

index and a list of sources for the quotations are provided. They are best read randomly and provide excellent material for quotations. In fact, the jacket states that the book is an ideal source for those seeking an apt quotation for an article or for those wanting to sample his thought-provoking and uplifting messages. However, Osler and his writings seem to be more relevant today, in the present era of erosion of ethics and commercialisation of the medical profession. In this context, Osler’s writings assume scriptural significance and should be read by everyone connected with the profession.

Some of his statements on specific illnesses such as gastric carcinoma or syphilis are either outdated or simply do not add much by way of being different or wise. But some of his quotes are apt today, as is his comment that courting the press can be dangerous: ‘In the life of every physician there comes the temptation to toy with the Delilah of the press—daily and otherwise. There are times when she may be courted with satisfaction, but beware! sooner or later she is sure to play the harlot, and has left many a man shorn of his strength, viz. the confidence of his professional brethren.’ Words of advice to many physicians who practise market medicine! Or consider this: ‘You have of course entered the profession of medicine with a view of obtaining a livelihood, but in dealing with your patients, let this always be a secondary consideration.’

The authors are distinguished Oslerians and one of them, Charles S Bryan, has written earlier on Osler. His book *Osler: inspirations from a great physician* (Oxford University Press, 1997) is a masterpiece and indeed copies of this book are being distributed to medical students by drug companies in the USA. Both books, *The quotable Osler* as well as *Osler: inspirations from a great physician*, demonstrate why Osler was revered then and continues to be a role model to the many who wish to practise medicine of the old school.