



## The virtual Dr. Osler

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A photo of Dr. William Osler taken in 1890 as he started writing *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* shows an absorbed man sitting at a desk, with a carpet of textbooks spread in front of him. Use of modern information technology would have considerably shortened and simplified Osler's task, but how would this great humanist and philosopher have regarded the use of soulless machines like computers in medicine? And how would he deal with the flood of medical information available on the Web?

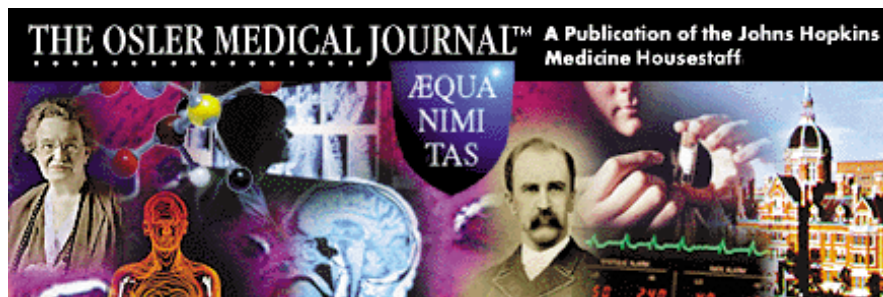
We'll never know what Osler would have said about the Internet, but we do know what the Internet says about him. A query for "William Osler" yielded more than 1000 hits, which provided a reflection of his life, accomplishments and philosophies.

Osler was born in Bond Head, Ont., and it is fitting that Sir William Osler Public School in Simcoe County bears his name — even if Osler receives far less space on the school's Web page than the boys' basketball schedule.

McGill granted Osler his medical degree, and he was a professor of medicine in Montreal before heading to the US. The Osler Society of McGill University was inaugurated in 1921, and its Web page ([www.medcor.mcgill.ca/~oslerweb/home.html](http://www.medcor.mcgill.ca/~oslerweb/home.html)) presents the history of the society, an essay contest and different Osler-related events.

Not surprisingly, Osler was a 1994 inductee of the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame ([johns.largnet.uwo.ca/shine/cmhf/cmhfhall.htm](http://johns.largnet.uwo.ca/shine/cmhf/cmhfhall.htm)), along with Maude Abbott, Frederick Banting and Wilder Penfield.

The American Osler Society ([staffweb.lib.uiowa.edu/deimas/AmOslerSoc/index.htm](http://staffweb.lib.uiowa.edu/deimas/AmOslerSoc/index.htm)) is a group of health professionals "dedicated to memorialize and perpetuate the just and charitable life, the intellectual resourcefulness and the ethical example of William Osler."



Its Web site has both a brief biography and bibliography.

Perhaps the best tribute to Osler's legacy is the *Osler Medical Journal* ([omj.med.jhu.edu](http://omj.med.jhu.edu)), an Internet publication created, written and edited by housestaff at Johns Hopkins. Osler was professor of medicine at the then fledgling medical school and penned his famous textbook there. The residents pay tribute to his memory by providing a forum that promotes reading, research and writing. Each issue has topic reviews, tips on bedside diagnosis, case reports and a section called Praxis, which deals with the human side of medicine. Osler would be proud to see this thoughtful effort bear his name.

The influence of Osler extends well beyond North America. A museum of radiology in Belgium features a poster of Osler as a pioneer of medicine. A medical clinic in Chennai, India, is named the Osler Diagnostics Centre. A Singapore medical resident has developed what may be the largest Osler site on the Web ([www.shim.org/~minhan/osler-homepage/osler-index.htm](http://www.shim.org/~minhan/osler-homepage/osler-index.htm)), with an extensive collection of quotations, biographical information and links to other Osler-related sites.

Several books on Osler are mentioned on the Web. The most famous is *The Life of Sir William Osler*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for its author, American neurologist Harvey Cushing. Another book deals with the nature of the relationship between Osler and one of his more famous patients, Walt Whitman. In brief, Whit-

man was not overly impressed by Osler's bedside manner and Osler was not a big fan of Whitman's poetry.

### About that headache . . .

Outspoken in his own day, Osler is still cited by some controversial groups to support their views. Several pro-marijuana sites refer to Osler's support of cannabis as a remedy for migraine headaches. An acupuncture site credits him with introducing the practice of acupuncture to American physicians.

Osler was a prolific author and sought-after speaker, and many of his pithier maxims are alive and well on the Web. He is quoted in diverse sites such as business pages, consulting services and medical sites like the Society of Medical Decision-Making. Here's a sampling.

**From a physician's personal page:** "Common sense in matters medical is rare, and is usually in inverse ratio to the degree of education."

**From a pharmacist's Web site:** "The desire to take medicine is perhaps the greatest feature which distinguishes man from animals."

Osler was a compassionate physician and humanist who took the young doctors of his day away from textbooks and to the patient's bedside. Perhaps he would not be offended to see today's physicians spending time at a computer terminal if he knew they were reading about his teachings. — Dr. Robert Patterson, [robpatterson@attcanada.net](mailto:robpatterson@attcanada.net)