



PMHx

Bill Osler, practical joker

On the father of modern medicine's famous sense of humour **BY TRISTAN BRONCA**

"The foolishness of yesterday has become the wisdom of tomorrow"
—Dr. Osler, a speech to the Canadian Medical Association, 1902

Many years ago, a professor at Dalhousie University told Dr. George Burden, a former writer for this magazine, an apocryphal story about Sir William Osler that had been passed down like an old rumour or a running joke. It went like this:

During a lecture, Dr. Osler held up a urine specimen from a severe diabetic and proposed to use it to test his students' powers of observation. Dr. Osler was arguably the most famous physician in the world at the time so when he dipped his finger in the urine and tasted it, the students dutifully obliged when he asked them to do the same. Disgusted, they all dipped, licked, and passed it on. Then Dr. Osler asked for their opinion.

"The urine was very sweet," they all agreed.

"Perhaps," said Dr. Osler. "But if you'd been observant you would have noticed that I placed my middle finger in the urine but my index finger in my mouth."

Dr. Osler is often called "the father of modern medicine" for achievements that are canon in Canadian medical history. He is often credited with creating the residency program and pioneered teaching methods that "brought medicine to the bedside." His *Principles and Practice of Medicine*, was, by some accounts, the first significant scientific textbook of medicine. Published in 1892 some doctors contend that it still contains some of the best clinical descriptions ever written.

Yet, Dr. Osler was far from the stodgy, self-serious type stereotypically associated with medicine (or fathers). Were he less involved in its upbringing, he might have been modern medicine's fun uncle.

It was evident from an early age. At

15 he was expelled from grammar school on account of his pranks, the targets of which also included his parents and, in at least one case, a clergyman. Before the clergyman arrived at their home, Osler junior warned his father that their visitor was quite deaf and that his father would have to shout so he could hear. What Osler senior didn't know was that his son had given a similar warning to the clergyman about the state of his father's hearing. "It is easy to imagine the boy's delight as the two men shouted and roared at each other over the course of the evening," Dr. Chris Nickson, a blogger and self-described "Oslerphile," wrote.

Later, colleagues would be on the business end of Dr. Osler's sense of humour, including his friend and pediatrician Dr. Abraham Jacobi. Before one speech Dr. Jacobi was to give in Baltimore, Dr. Osler described him to the local press as a champion track star who held several records with the New

York Athletic Association. “They were not amused when they discovered (Dr.) Jacobi was a frail septuagenarian,” Dr. Burden wrote in a 2012 story for the publication *Life as a Human*. When he took the stage to deliver his remarks, Dr. Osler plucked Dr. Jacobi’s notes from his pocket. He allowed the elderly doctor to search frantically for a beat before giving them back saying another guest had “found them” on the steps.

Then there was Dr. Egerton Yorrick Davis, Dr. Osler’s alter ego, under whose identity he published some remarkable pieces of writing. In 1884 he authored an article in the *Philadelphia Medical News* on “penis captivus”, an almost certainly fictional condition in which the male organ becomes trapped in the vagina during sex. (In Dr. Davis’ made-up retelling of one case, the woman had to be knocked out with chloroform; ice and other methods had failed.) Dr. Davis was apparently irritated by a colleague’s article on vaginismus, a related but real condition. But that article quickly became a footnote to Dr. Davis’, which would go on to fuel speculation about the condition until 1980.

At least a few of Dr. Osler’s pranks have had similar staying power. In 2018, an official analysis was conducted to determine the authenticity of an 1880 letter which accused Dr. Osler of being a grave robber—a common practice in the medical establishment in the then-not-too-distant past. Researchers were unsure whether the “letter is a revenge-motivated practical joke played on him by one of his famous colleagues or represents Dr. Osler’s last practical joke for posterity.”

Not all of his pranks meet our contemporary standards of acceptability, of course. Even in his day, Dr. Osler met significant backlash for a joke during a lecture suggesting euthanasia for the elderly. Torrents of hate mail followed. Funding was withdrawn for a medical building going up in his name. “Oslerize” even entered the lexicon as a term to describe exterminating the elderly. James Joyce even references it in *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Dr. Osler did indeed have some questionable opinions about the value of life after 60, a proverbial hill on which

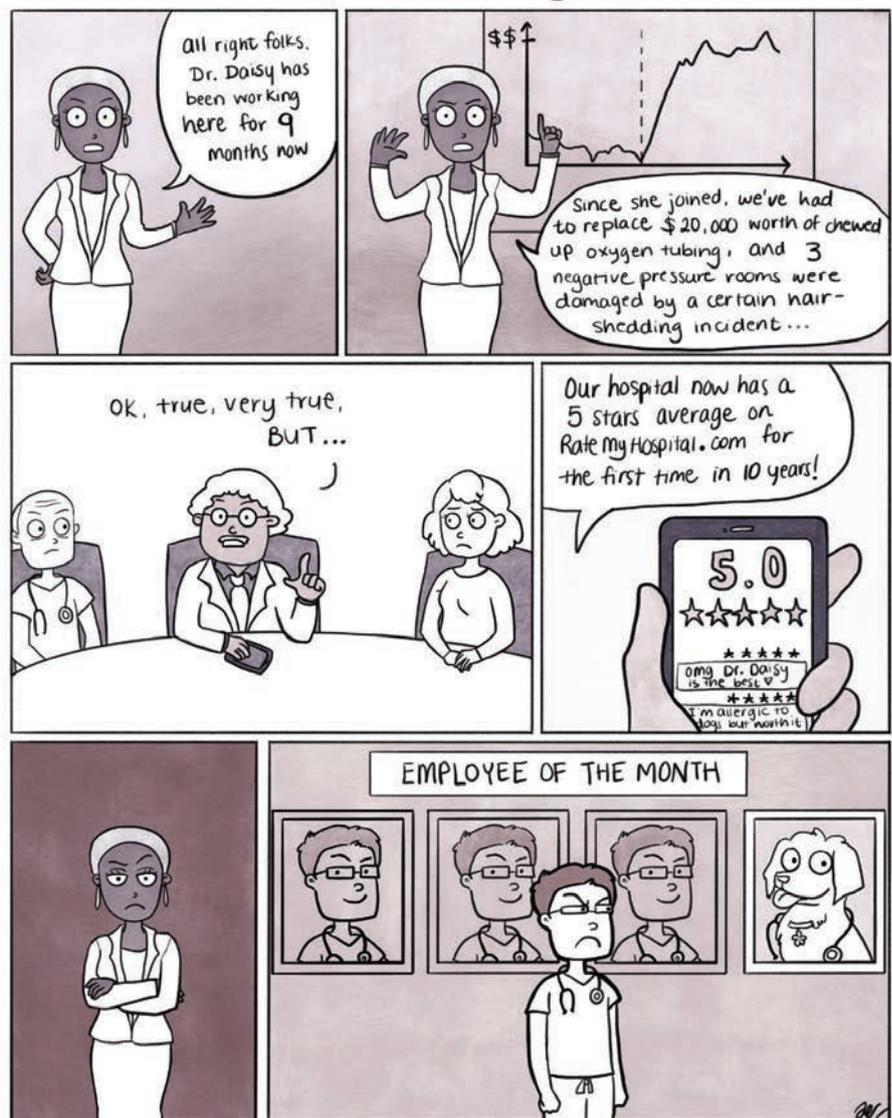
he was willing to die (but, coming up on 60 himself, not quite literally, which was sort of the joke that got him in trouble). He also had some unfortunate opinions about gender, and some of Dr. Davis’ gag papers about race and indigenous societies would, as you can imagine, land very differently today.

Yet, Dr. Osler did fight to allow women to attend medical school, and, as reporter Tristin Hopper wrote in the *National Post*, in an era of rampant

racism, anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism, he was a staunch advocate of tolerance. His legacy is defined by empathy and equanimity, values he felt were core to the profession.

His sense of humour, however, is usually written about as a quirk, an ebullient footnote on his legacy. But it’s probably something more; something that, as the man himself put it, sustains and aids doctors lucky enough to be blessed with it. **MP**

Doctor Daisy



BY DR. JOANNA LI, an emergency physician and hospitalist in Quebec.