

THE PHYSICIAN WRITING

Physicians as Writers

Jock Murray

Department of Neurology, Medical Humanities Program, Dalhousie University

More doctors have achieved fame in literature than members of any other profession.

Sir David Waldron Smithers, *This Idle Trade: On Doctors Who Were Writers*¹

It is often said that an unusual number of doctors like to write and a surprising number become distinguished in literature. Why would that be? I imagine that it has much to do with the kind of person attracted to medicine, the experience of medicine, and the daily involvement in so many human stories.

Although it sounds saccharine in its repetition, young people enter medicine because they like people and want to help them. They have to be good communicators and listeners. Physicians are practiced observers, trained to see the elements of

the patient's story, and enjoy the interaction with patients and families. They are also part of the full gamut of life experiences and events, often in dramatic fashion. Smithers noted that "opportunities for the close observation of the great variety of men and women under conditions of stress, suffering, relief and bereavement has been theirs; indeed they have seen more of the triumph of the human spirit than most." It is no wonder that they might want to stand back and contemplate these issues and record them.

Although medicine can inform the physician's writing, literature can inform the physician's medicine. Smithers points out a reciprocal relationship with literature as involvement in literature and the humanities can improve the empathy, diagnostic skills, comforting and understanding of patients.

It was perhaps more common in the 18th and 19th centuries to see physicians involved in many other fields because of their broad education in the humanities and general sciences. Monro collected hundreds of physicians who contributed to literature, science and sports.² For instance, he mentions a collection of 162 physicians who were poets prior to 1916. It was also an era when many physicians had more difficulty making a reasonable living in the practice of medicine and had to turn their hand to other endeavors just to support their families. We forget that the era of the affluent physician is primarily a phenomenon after World War II.

I include a short list of physician writers in Table 1. Longer lists can be found in the books by Munro and Smithers as well as in the important annotated database of medicine and literature from the New York University College of Medicine.³

Some physicians write about medicine but others write literature informed by their experience from their medical training and practice. Oliver Sacks,

Table 1. Some Physician Authors

Danny Abse	Michael LaCombe
John Aiken	John Locke
Mark Aikenside	Saint Luke
Richard Asher	Somerset Maugham
Thomas Beddoes	Sir Andrew Macphail
Robert Bridges	John MacCrae
Mikhail Bulgakov	Johnathan Miller
Thomas Campion	Silas Weir Mitchell
Anton Chekhov	Axel Munthe
Clif Cleaveland	Sir William Osler
Robert Coles	Wilder Penfield
Jack Coulehan	Walker Percy
Michael Crichton	François Rabelais
Erasmus Darwin	Peter Mark Roget
Paul DeKruif	Oliver Sacks
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle	Richard Selzer
William Drummond	Frank Slaughter
Macdonald Critchley	Tobias Smollett
Jacques Ferron	John Stone
Sir Samuel Garth	Lewis Thomas
Oliver Gogarty	Abraham Verghese
Oliver Goldsmith	Sir William Wilde
Oliver Wendell Holmes	William Carlos Williams
John Keats	Martin Winckler
Peri Klass	Thomas Young
Harold Klawans	

La médecine d'un écrivain

... les hommes, les femmes, les clients qui viennent gentiment te voir, qui se dévient humblement pour que tu les examines et qui après te paieront, ces gens sont avant tout des créatures poétiques.

Le fils aîné du notaire Ferron a choisi, un peu par bravoure, une autre profession libérale que celle de son père : la médecine. Après avoir obtenu son diplôme, il va pratiquer « en région », dans la péninsule gaspéenne. Comme à Rivière-Madeline en 1946, le docteur Jacques Ferron va pratiquer toute sa vie dans des milieux populaires. Omniscient de banlieue, avec son frère Paul, médecin-accoucheur instruit par les sages-femmes, médecine générale au Mont-Trépan, puis à Saint-Joseph-de-Saint, il a pratiqué la médecine, comme l'écriture, dans une société en pleine mutation. Autour de conflits d'intérêts publics dans l'information médicale et paramédicale, il a participé à deux tentatives importantes de son époque.

S'il a écrit qu'il était devenu médecin pour que celui-ci soit le maître de l'écrivain, s'il implore quel accès, s'il expose quelle lecture des hommes sauvages ou de l'Amérique, de nombreux copies et de La Conférence, inscrite comme la médecine fut, pour l'écrivain l'écrivain, le plus qu'un autre-pain, mais une source inépuisable d'inspiration.



Les gens rendent témoignage

« Les gens rendent témoignage. Leur langage est hermétique. On ne sait trop dans quelle cause ils placent, quelles sont leurs accusations. D'ailleurs on ne les écoute pas. On les entend tout ensemble dans les lieux où le temps cesse, où rien ne se passe sauf ce qui a déjà été vécu ailleurs et dont ils s'adressent à l'homme pour l'éclaircir la voie au milieu des ténèbres qui l'avaient fait siffler pour se faire entendre et se donner à se couvrir. Les gens, les gens, ils parlent tout le même temps quand parlent-ils pas, comme au hasard, comme des gens qui font semblant, des gens qui se tiennent à leur place et patient, des gens autorisés (et qu'on) attend que personne... »

« Les gens rendent témoignage » - Les notes de Jacques Ferron (1972)



Exciting Health Care Opportunities

Meno Ya Win Health Centre is an innovative and growing hospital based on the principle of "health, wellness, well-being and wholeness." We provide acute and long term care, ambulatory care, mental health and addiction services, and community-based services to the Sioux Lookout area and to the northern First Nations. Are you looking for more variety and the chance to apply your hard earned skills as well as learn new ones? We have challenging positions available in several areas including leadership nursing positions and leading edge management opportunities working within a four party agreement to build our new state-of-the-art hospital

We offer qualified applicants an exciting opportunity to help create a centre of excellence in health care. Sioux Lookout's pristine natural landscape and unlimited recreational opportunities offer the perfect place to raise a family.

Check out our website at www.slmhc.on.ca for current openings within the Meno Ya Win Health Centre. For further inquiries please email humanresources@slmhc.on.ca, mail at Human Resources P.O.Box 909 Sioux Lookout, Ontario P8T 1B4 or phone (807)737-3030.

Meno Ya Win is an equal opportunity employer. In addition we invite interested candidates to visit the web-site for Sioux Lookout Ontario at www.siuoxlookout.com.



SIUOX LOOKOUT
Meno Ya Win
HEALTH CENTRE

Richard Selzer and Jacques Ferron write about the experience of medicine and patients. William Carlos Williams in his poetry, Anton Chekhov in his plays and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes adventures have medicine as a background that informs their writing. But one might not guess from their writing that Somerset Maugham, John Keats and Oliver Goldsmith were physicians.

Medicine does provide a unique opportunity to share stories with patients, and to become a part of those stories. Being a good physician requires an understanding of the human condition and all the joys and courage that characterize the lives of so many but also the slings and arrows that lay them low. What better training for a writer.

REFERENCES

1. Smithers, D.W. *This Idle Trade: On Doctors Who Were Writers*. Tunbridge Wells (U.K.): Dragonfly Press, 1989.
2. Monro, T.K. *The Physician: As A Man of Letters, Science and Action*. Glasgow: Jackson, Wylie and Co., 1933 (Second edition Edinburgh: E&S Livingstone Ltd. 1951).
3. On-Line database of Literature, Arts, and Medicine. New York University School of Medicine. <http://mchip00.med.nyu.edu/lit-med/medhum.html>

INTRODUCING
A NEW
Physician
Recruitment
Website
for
Newfoundland
and Labrador

www.nlphysicianjobs.ca