Physician Writers

Numerous physicians have gained recognition and fame as authors. This comes as no surprise. As writer/physician Somerset Maugham said, “I do not know a better training for a writer than to spend some time in the medical profession.”

What is surprising is that more physicians do not write, considering the wealth of material to be derived from the patients we see every day. The case histories we hear from our patients constitute a fantastic trove of material for creating literature, which after all is nothing more than the telling of stories. Every clinical case we see comes with a story—or two or three. There is nothing in human life that physicians have not seen; we witness the entire spectrum, from pain and relief to despair and joy to death and birth. Every time we write a clinical history on a chart, we lay the foundation for a good story—that is, for literature.

In fact, Oliver Sacks and Lewis Thomas, among others, have elevated the clinical case itself to an art form. The New Yorker magazine often publishes beautifully crafted articles by those two writers and many practicing physicians who have encountered particularly interesting patients and unusual diseases.

The “well-developed, well-nourished, right-handed white male who appears to be his stated age of 54” becomes the basis of literature: “Mr. J, an insurance executive, had been my patient for over a decade. We were on first-name basis. But, today, he seemed noticeably changed. He was hostile and did not respond to any of my pleasantries. He half-smiled with his mouth, but his eyes were dull. I noted that his dress and grooming had deteriorated.” Prosaic information is transformed into drama and suspense.

Henry James advised, “Try to be a writer on whom nothing is lost.”

That’s an ambition familiar to any physician who examines a patient. The best clinicians and the best writers are superb observers. (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a great physician and writer, created the famous character Sherlock Holmes, who may be the best observer in all of literature.) Astute physicians and writers have developed what the French philosopher Michel Foucault (himself a psychopathologist by training) called “the clinical gaze.” They perceive not only what is on the surface of reality, but what is beneath as well.

Some of our finest writers were physicians who found medical subjects too constraining, and so undertook literature—novels, poetry, drama and short stories.

In a small way, we can do the same.

Although a physician who wants to be a writer will never “go to the well” and find it dry—his store of experiences is more likely to gush out in torrents — needlessly striving for perfection may keep him from putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard).

But we are not writing for posterity; we are writing for ourselves.

Here are nine of our best and well-known physician/writers.

John Keats (1795–1821)

Although he died prematurely, John Keats managed in a very short while to become an immortal, one of the greatest poets of the English language, and was generally regarded as the archetype of the Romantic writer.

He was orphaned at 12 and two years later apprenticed to a local apothecary-surgeon. In 1816 he passed his examination and became a doctor. While he never actually practiced medicine, his work is suffused with sympathy for human suffering. He might be considered a healer of the spirit.

Some of his better-known works are “Endymion” (“A thing of beauty is a joy forever”) and the immortal odes: “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”) and “Ode on Melancholy.” All three were written in the same month. Also: “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and his unfinished epic, “Hyperion.”

Keats’s enduring fascinations included sensuality, love, beauty and pain—and death. One fateful day in 1821, after a fit of coughing, he noticed blood on his handkerchief and remarked that it was his death sentence. In fact it was tuberculosis, something he knew a little about. He’d devoted three years to nursing a brother who eventually succumbed to the disease, which also killed his mother and his good friend, Richard Woodhouse.

In his poem, “John Keats,” Lord Byron blames his young friend’s death on “savage” reviews of his work.

The realization that he was likely to die an early death gives poignancy to lyrics such as, “When I have fears that I may cease to be/ Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain”; “O for 10 years, to overwhelm myself in poesy!”; and (mortality) “weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep.”

Some scholars believe Keats probably suffered from manic-depressive disease—like many other prominent authors, including Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson. Artists with symptoms of bipolar illness (the phrase Keats used was the less medical, “my indolent fits”) often do their best work in brilliant bursts, as
was the case with Keats, who did virtually all of his writing in a headlong nine-month rush in 1819.

It is evident from his letters that he was subject to violent mood swings. “I am in that temper,” he wrote once, “That if I were under water I would scarcely kick to come to the top.” A friend said the consumptive poet often sank into a “profound disquet, which he could not or would not explain,” seemingly caused by the “motion of the inland sea he loved so well.”

Keats’ self-prognosis was altogether too accurate. He died four months past his 25th birthday. Ever mindful of mortality, he had asked that his tombstone bear the melancholy inscription: “Here lies one whose name is writ in water.”

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. His name is writ in gold.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894)

“Life is a fatal complaint, and an eminently contagious one,” from “Poet at the Breakfast Table,” 1872

This American physician, poet, and humorist was notable for his medical research and teaching, as well as his immensely popular “Breakfast-Table” series of essays.

He read law at Harvard University before opting for a medical career. After studies at Harvard University and in Paris, he received his medical degree from Harvard in 1836. It was not long after that, Holmes wrote many years later, that he “first tasted the intoxicating pleasure of authorship.”

“A college periodical conducted by a friend of mine . . . tempted me into print, and there is no form of lead poisoning which more rapidly and thoroughly pervades the blood and bones and marrow than that which reaches the young author through mental contact with type-metal. I had my first attack of author’s lead-poisoning, and I have never quite got rid of it from that day to this.”

Despite that enthusiasm, Holmes decided that it wouldn’t be prudent to depend on writing for his daily bread, so chose instead a profession that appealed to his humanity and scientific temper. In 1835 he opened a medical practice in Boston.

Holmes is a supreme example of a physician who taught and practiced medicine full-time while also becoming a highly successful author. His writing shines with wit and wisdom and has been favorably compared with that of Benjamin Franklin. “The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table,” a series of prose pieces, is filled with droll humor and sound advice.

Among his many poems, “The Chambered Nautilus” and “The Deacon’s Masterpiece: or the “Wonderful One-hoss-Shay” are favorites. The popularity of his poem “Old Ironsides” helped prevent the scrapping of the warship U.S.S. Constitution.

Holmes remained a high-spirited, witty writer until his death at 85. His son, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., became a distinguished Supreme Court jurist.

Sir William Osler (1849–1919)

William Osler was born in a remote part of Ontario and decided on a career in medicine after a year at Trinity College there. In 1872 he received his MD degree from McGill University in Montreal, then, like many of his fellows, went abroad for graduate study in London, Berlin and Vienna. He returned to Canada in 1874, joining the medical faculty at McGill. Ten years later he left for Philadelphia to become a professor of clinical medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

Osler’s 1872 book, “The Principles and Practice of Medicine,” revolutionized the medical curriculum in the United States and Canada and was the standard text in clinical medicine for 40 years. He was not just an editor of chapters written by a host of others, as often is the case today. He wrote all of it himself. As an educator, he always insisted that students learned best by doing, and that clinical instruction should begin and end with the patient.

In 1888 John S. Billings recruited Osler to be physician-in-chief of the new Johns Hopkins Hospital and a professor in the medical school planned there. In 1905 Osler became the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, then the most prestigious medical appointment in the English-speaking world.

In the course of his career, he wrote more than 1,500 scientific articles.

The title of his most famous literary work, “Aequanimitas,” refers to a quality of self-possession and calm under stress that he thought crucial because it gave patients hope of recovery and confidence in their physicians.

Most medical students and physicians would like to be like Osler. None of us can, of course. But we can try in our imperfect way to emulate this great physician, teacher, scholar, researcher, and writer—one who considered medicine a sacred calling.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930)

Arthur Conan Doyle served his beloved England during the Anglo-Boer War as senior physician at a field hospital. One result was his 1902 knighthood (most people wrongly think he was knighted for his writing). Another was his first book, “The War in South Africa,” in which he staunchly defended England’s war policy.

It is said that Holmes’s first medical task after school was co-signing the committal papers of his father, who was demented. The ghastly experience became the basis of a story he wrote much later, “The Surgeon of Gaster Fell.”

Young Arthur’s decision to pursue a career in medicine was greatly influenced by Dr. Bryan Charles Waller, a lodger his mother took in to make ends meet. Waller had trained at the University of Edinburgh, so that’s where Arthur got his own medical education. As a student, he met a number of other future authors attending the university, including James Barrie and Robert Louis Stevenson. But the person who most impressed him was a teacher, Dr. Joseph Bell, a master of observation, logic, deduction and
diagnosis—all qualities later to be found in the persona of the celebrated detective, Sherlock Holmes.

In 1891 shortly after earning degrees in medicine and surgery, Holmes contracted a virulent case of influenza, and for several days wasn’t sure whether he would live or die. After his health improved, he decided he’d been foolish to try to combine a medical career with a literary one, and “with a wild rush of joy,” decided to give up medicine. He wrote, “I remember in my delight taking the handkerchief which lay upon the coverlet in my fuddled hand, and tossing it up to the ceiling in my exultation.

Late in life Doyle was a noted spiritualist and apparently a believer in fairies. In his last book, “The Edge of the Unknown,” he recorded his psychic experiences. He died of heart disease in 1930 at his home in Sussex.

Doyle’s first novel about Holmes, “A Study in Scarlet,” appeared in 1887. It introduced the detective and his doughty companion, Dr. Watson, two of the legendary characters in all of literature.

Doyle so admired Oliver Wendell Holmes that many have speculated that he named his detective in his honor. (Doyle once wrote of (O.H.) Holmes, “Never have I so known and loved a man whom I had never seen.”)

The Sherlock Holmes stories are a storehouse of information on almost all aspects of medical practice, especially pharmacology. Doyle used more medical references in his fiction than any other writer. Although he wrote on many other subjects, the Sherlock Holmes stories overshadowed all else, creating a frustration that led him in 1893 to “kill off” the detective. However, readers were so incensed that he was forced to revive him 10 years later.

Doyle stressed to medical students the importance of compassion and kindness. He commented that the medical education of his day was crippled by its emphasis on rote memory and exotic diseases.

Legend has it that when Doyle arrived at the heavenly gates, God told him Adam and Eve had vanished, and challenged him to find them. “Elementary, my dear God,” he is said to have replied, “They have no navels!”

**Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)**

Anton Chekhov, one of the greatest writers Russia has produced, wrote: “Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress. When I get fed up with one, I spend the night with the other. Though it’s irregular, it’s less boring this way, and besides, neither of them loses anything through my infidelity.”

After a hard life, Chekhov died at age 44 from what he called “the family disease”—tuberculosis, which he diagnosed in himself in 1884. Until the very end, however, he was a faithful husband of medicine. Records show that he treated more than 1,500 patients in 1892-93. He also organized famine relief, fought cholera epidemics, built schools, served on local boards and councils and even opened a post office.

Chekhov’s style was described best by the author himself, who wrote, “All I wanted was to say honestly to people: ‘Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!’ The important thing is that people should realize that; for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves.”

It is widely conceded that Chekhov is the greatest writer who also was a physician. A son of a poor grocer and grandson of a serf, he taught himself to read and write.

He practiced medicine for more than seven years, identifying with the suffering of his patients and of humanity in general. His literary works contain many references to medical practice, which he considered a lens through which to study human behavior and emotions.

Among his masterpieces are the plays “Uncle Vanya,” “The Cherry Orchard” and “The Seagull.” He also wrote hundreds of short stories, one of which, “The Lady With the Dog,” is regarded as a classic.

**Lewis Thomas (1913–1993)**

In 1971 while Lewis Thomas was chairman of the Department of Pathology at the Yale Medical School, his friend Dr. Franz Ingelinger, editor of the “New England Journal of Medicine,” asked him to write a monthly essay to be called “Notes of a Biology Watcher.” Each piece would be about 1,000 words long, filling one page. There would be no pay, but there also would be little editing of his work. It was a deal Thomas couldn’t refuse.

By then Thomas had already written or co-written more than 200 scientific articles, but he wanted to try an informal, conversational essay form, modeled loosely on those of Michel de Montaigne. He was anxious to shake off the “relentlessly flat style required for absolute unambiguity in every word” that was expected in scientific articles. He soon developed a personal style and churned out essays for 10 years, treating a range of subjects, scientific and not. The essays most often combine natural observations of the human body with personal meditations, and a vision of man’s connectedness to the universe.

Very few physicians of the 20th or any other century have done so fine a job of combining science and literature as Thomas, who devoted most of his medical career to research (chiefly of immunological defense mechanisms) and administration.

He was born in Flushing, N.Y., the son of a family physician and his nurse wife. Always fascinated by his father’s profession, he entered Princeton University at 15, developing an interest in poetry and literary humor. He was admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1933. While an intern at Boston City Hospital, he supported himself by donating blood and selling poems (mostly about death) to the “Atlantic Monthly,” “Harper’s Bazaar” and the “Saturday Evening Post.”

In his distinguished medical career he was dean of two medical
schools—Yale and NYU—and director of the Sloan-Kettering Institute. He is widely considered the father of modern immunology. Yet his greatest contribution may be his literary work: simple but profound observations about medicine, cosmology, nature, philosophy and the mystery of life. His best-known works are probably “The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher” and “The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher.”

Most of the essays in both books appeared first in “The New England Journal of Medicine.”

Toward the end of his life, Thomas lost some of his ebullience and began to brood on man’s self-destructive nature, pollution and the dangers of nationalism.

Anyone involved in the medical profession should read all of Thomas’s works. They’re a perfect antidote to the dyspeptic experience of poring over sterile textbooks and journals.

W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965)

W. Somerset Maugham was born to a wealthy British family in Paris, and learned French as his native tongue. At 10 he was orphaned and sent to England to live with his uncle, a vicar. He later attended King’s School, Canterbury and Heidelberg University, and then studied medicine at St. Thomas’s Medical School in London, becoming a doctor in 1897. Drawing on his experiences as a ward extern in the slums of Lambeth (“In those three years I must have witnessed pretty well every emotion of which man is capable,” he wrote), he produced his first novel, “Liz of Lambeth.” Like Oliver Wendell Holmes, he quickly and happily abandoned medicine after his early novels and plays proved successful.

Almost instantly, Maugham became a hugely successful writer, for a time the highest-paid author in the world. He once had four plays running simultaneously in London.

His signature work was his autobiographical novel “Of Human Bondage,” which tells how shyness, poor health, loneliness and handicap (clubfoot in the novel’s protagonist, stuttering in Maugham) led to one’s becoming a passive observer of life, rather than a participant. His other successes included “The Moon and Sixpence” (about the life of the painter Paul Gauguin), “The Razor’s Edge,” “Cakes and Ale” and the collection “The Trembling of a Leaf,” which included the famous short story, “Rain.”

Maugham enjoyed a royal lifestyle of travel, luxury and fame, but his stories were, as he wrote, “from the golden lode of material” of the lives of ordinary people. “I have never pretended to be anything but a storyteller,” he said. “I stand in the very first row of the second-raters.” His indulgent lifestyle doesn’t seem to have harmed him, as he lived to be 95.

Oliver Sacks (1933– )

Oliver Sacks was born in London, England, and received his medical degree from Queen’s College, Oxford, before moving to the United States in 1960. After advanced studies at UCLA, he joined the neurology faculty at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, N.Y., and became a consultant neurologist at various New York City-area hospitals.

With an intense interest in his extraordinary patients and a proclivity for thinking “outside the box,” Sacks, a neuropathologist, expanded the straightforward writing of clinical histories into unique literary artistry. The most famous of his nine books is probably “Awakenings,” which inspired the Harold Pinter play, “A Kind of Alaska,” and was later made into a hit movie. Another of his best-sellers is “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales,” in which he describes brain-damaged patients and their peculiar perceptions of the world. Sacks generally writes about unusual cases he has treated. Many of his pieces have been published in the “New Yorker.”

Sacks doesn’t look like a professor of neurology. He’s a big, burly fellow, a weightlifter and motorcycle enthusiast. His writings make it seem that he has climbed into the minds of his patients as they manage their suffering. His identification with his patients often seems to border on mysticism. The “New York Times” has dubbed him “the poet laureate of medicine.”

One of his books is intensely personal: In “A Leg to Stand On” (1984), he writes about an accident that temporarily cost him the use of a leg, using his own case history to continue exploring his idea of the unity of body, mind and behavior.

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, N. J., and while a student at Mann High School, developed interests in poetry and biology. Soon thereafter he decided to devote his life to both medicine and writing, mostly the writing of poetry. He earned his medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania, later training in obstetrics and gynecology.

Williams is considered one of the finest and most American of poets. He acknowledged having been influenced deeply by Walt Whitman and, especially, by his contemporary Ezra Pound.

Williams revitalized American poetry with technical innovations in rhyme and meter and an insistence that poetry needn’t be obscure to be powerful.

As an old man, Williams wrote, echoing Anton Chekhov, “When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing.”

As a general practitioner with a heavy pediatric practice, Williams was known for his good-natured, gentle, compassionate manner. He never stopped writing, often jotting down notes on prescription pads while waiting to see his next patient. He treated people from all walks of life—the poor, prostitutes, criminals and the well to do.

Most people have been taught that good poetry is difficult, but
Williams demonstrated that simplicity and directness could be signposts to the profound. His work is fresh and clear, free of sentimentality and vagueness. It values emotional restraint and finds beauty and wisdom in “common” speech. One of his best-loved poems, “The Red Wheel Barrow,” is haiku-like in its clarity:

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.

“The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams, from COLLECTED POEMS: 1909-1939, VOLUME 1, copyright © 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp

The imagery of red and white, the stanza breaks, the multiple meanings of “so much depends,” all make this 16-word poem a gem of minimalist beauty.

“I think all writing is a disease,” Williams once said. “You can’t stop it.”

Indeed, writing may be a disease latent in all physicians—men and women whose lives are replete with colorful stories: silly and somber, comic and tragic, bizarre and achingly prosaic.

Joan Didion (not a physician) says that she writes “entirely to find out what I am thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means.” Sometimes we only discover what we think or feel about a subject when we write it down. The physical act of jotting one’s thoughts can be a great stress reliever.

So write. Essays, journals, editorials, clinical notes, advice to patients, letters to the editor—whatever. Don’t worry about doing it wrong; no one knows how to do it right.

“There are three rules for writing the novel,” Maugham said. “Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.”

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