Osler goes viral: “The Fixed Period” revisited

Charles S. Bryan, MD

Department of Internal Medicine (Emeritus), University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Columbia, South Carolina

ABSTRACT

William Osler’s parting address to faculty at the Johns Hopkins University, given on February 22, 1905, and published as “The Fixed Period,” clouded his departure from North America after reporters sensationalized a playful suggestion that aging professors be chloroformed. A newly available collection of newspaper clippings affords a semiquantitative analysis of the press reaction. Only 40% of the writers openly criticized Osler. Some (about 15%) defended him; many (33%) merely attempted humor; and a few (about 6%) wrote poetry. Often overlooked are the main points of Osler’s address: awareness of one’s place in the adult life cycle and the need for self-renewal with advancing age.

KEYWORDS Adult; aging; life cycle; Osler, William; “The Fixed Period”

n February 22, 1905, William Osler (1849–1919), then the most famous physician in the English-speaking world, gave a farewell address to faculty of the Johns Hopkins University, later published as “The Fixed Period.”¹ *Oslerize* became a synonym for *euthanize* after reporters sensationalized Osler’s attempt at a harmless literary allusion. Previous accounts of the press reaction relied mainly on larger newspapers such as the *Baltimore Sun* and the *New York Times*.^{2–18} Presented here is a fuller analysis of the press reaction based on a large collection of newspaper clippings recently donated to the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions. Also discussed are Osler’s usually overlooked main points: awareness of one’s place in the adult life cycle and the need for self-renewal with advancing age.

THE STORY IN BRIEF

McCoy Hall on the Homewood Campus of the Johns Hopkins University was “packed to the window sills” with faculty and alumni celebrating commencement day and anticipating the farewell address of a popular professor.¹⁵ Osler reassured them that he had given Hopkins his best years and that it was time to move on. He disclosed “two fixed ideas well known to my friends,” the first being “the comparative uselessness of men above forty years of age.” Younger men make the breakthroughs: “Take the sum of human achievement in

action, in science, in art, in literature—subtract the work of the men above forty, and while we should miss great treasures, even priceless treasures, we would practically be where we are to-day.” The second “fixed idea,” the one that got him into trouble, was that professors should retire at age 60.

An allusion to *The Fixed Period* (1882), a satirical novel by Anthony Trollope (1815–882), became Osler’s faux pas. Colonists on an imaginary Pacific island blame the elderly for most of the world’s problems and resolve that men retire at 67 for a year of contemplation before suicide by the traditional Roman method of exsanguination in a warm bath. Osler, who characteristically salted his speeches with literary allusions from memory, failed to fact-check Trollope’s novel and got it wrong, saying “the plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college into which men at sixty retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform.” He added: “Whether Anthony Trollope’s suggestion of a college and chloroform should be carried out or not I have become a little dubious, as my own time is getting so short.”

The second and slightly longer section of Osler’s address seldom receives comment but for him was the more important that day. He recounted the early years of the Johns Hopkins Hospital and its medical school (1889–1905) and praised those who helped form what became a model for academic medical centers in the USA. These included Johns Hopkins (1795–1873), the Quaker merchant who left the bulk of his estate to found a university and a hospital; Francis T. King

Corresponding author: Charles S. Bryan, MD, Department of Internal Medicine (Emeritus), University of South Carolina School of Medicine, 6222 Westshore Road, Columbia, SC 29206 (e-mail: cboslerian@gmail.com)

Received May 3, 2018; Revised June 10, 2018; Accepted June 14, 2018.

Figure 1. Nationwide ridicule of “The Fixed Period” address included cartoons such as this one, showing haloed William Osler dispensing chloroform to aging men. Image courtesy of the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.

(1817–1891), another Quaker merchant who as chairman of the hospital’s board of trustees advanced the idea “that the hospital should form part of the Medical School, and that it should be an institution for the study as well as for the cure of diseases”; John Shaw Billings (1838–1913), an adviser to the first board of trustees who contributed architectural and organizational know-how; and Daniel Coit Gilman (1831–1908), the first president of the Johns Hopkins University who in Osler’s words “loved difficulties just for the pleasure of making them disappear.” Osler viewed his own singular contribution as the admission of senior medical students to the hospital “as part of its machinery, as an essential part of the work of the wards.” He memorably stated: “I desire no other epitaph... than the statement that I taught medical students in the wards, as I regard this as by far the most useful and important work I have been called upon to do.”

Having rehearsed the address before his wife and a few close friends, none of whom had substantive criticisms, Osler was blindsided by reporters searching for a sound bite. Newspaper headlines screamed, for example, “Osler recommends chloroform at sixty.” Osler became controversial throughout the USA to the delight of cartoonists (Figure 1). Osler-related press clippings were occasionally found on suicide victims. Grace Osler did her best to shield her husband from hate mail arriving at their Baltimore residence. Osler gave three more farewell addresses, published as “Unity, Peace, and Concord,” “The Student Life,” and “L’Envoi,” before leaving the USA on March 19, 1905, aboard the RMS *Cedric* to start a new life at Oxford. He never fully recovered from the press coverage of “The Fixed Period” address. Eleven years later, in 1916, he told young men at Oxford, “Boys, do not read Trollope. He is dangerous.”¹⁹

OSLER GOES VIRAL

Most accounts of Osler’s address describe how newspapers throughout the USA carried the story,^{2–18} but to the present

author’s knowledge no attempts have been made to evaluate quantitatively the extent of the coverage. This was made possible by a scrapbook donated to the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.²⁰ The scrapbook contains about 700 clippings from the Chicago-based United States Press Clipping Bureau, one of several such agencies that sprung up during the late 19th century.²¹ The clippings are taped into the scrapbook and sometimes overlap; hence, some were not read in their entirety out of respect for the fragile, 112-year-old newsprint. Statistical analysis was based on a convenience sample of 200 items.

It was determined that 40% of the writers were overtly critical of William Osler; 15% defended Osler; 33% merely attempted to be humorous; 6% wrote poetry; and 7% did not fit any of the above categories. Thus, writers who were sharply critical were in a slight minority.

Relatively few were overtly hostile. A contributor to the Beaumont, Texas, *Enterprise* wrote:

The newspapers all over the country are still discussing Prof. Osler of Hopkins University and his chloroform-at-the-age-of-60 proposition. This is all a waste of time and space; Osler simply proved by his address that he was an ass, and the public rendered a verdict to that effect.

A writer for the Freeport, Illinois, *Journal* called Osler “a college crank who wanted to be exploited in the papers.” The Kansas City, Missouri, *Inquirer* reported that a local club passed a resolution that Osler be chloroformed and appointed “a committee to put the quietus to him.” The Brooklyn, New York, *Eagle* predicted that at the farewell dinner for Osler scheduled for May 2, 1905, at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel “not a single glass of chloroform will be served before the champagne.”

Apologists for Osler observed correctly that he was serious in his conviction that paradigm-changing innovation is usually made before age 40 but joking when he alluded to “chloroform at sixty.” The Chicago *Record-Herald* averred that close reading “will show that he said some sensible things and that he did not advocate chloroform at 60.” The Ottawa, Canada, *Citizen* noted:

Treating seriously only what was seriously intended, I take him to mean that after forty a man loses his power of origination, and that the later years are devoted mainly to repetition and elaboration of ideas previously conceived... To my mind this is largely borne out by everyday observation.

The Augusta, Georgia, *Messenger* lamented: “Oh what humanity has been forced to undergo from well intentioned attempts at wit that were woefully miscarried.” The New Orleans, Louisiana, *State* acknowledged Osler’s reputation as “an inveterate joker” and recounted his “preposterous articles” written under the nom de plume Egerton Yorrick Davis. The Stetts City, Missouri, *Sunbeam* likewise called Osler an “inveterate joker” and recalled his story about “The Baby on the Track”—an infant found alive and well except

Table 1. William Osler and the adult life cycle

The adult life cycle ^a			William Osler	
Age	Stage	Tasks	Age	Activities
21–35	Identity	Choose a career; determine the scope of one's ambition ("the dream") and prepare accordingly	23	Graduates from medical school
			24	Resolves to be a generalist physician "of the first rank"
			25–35	Teaches at McGill; performs numerous autopsies; publishes frequently
35–55	Generativity	Break free of former constraints ("becoming one's own man or woman"); become recognized for competence in one's field; contribute to the general good	35	Becomes professor of clinical medicine at the University of Pennsylvania
			40	Becomes professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins
			42	Brings out <i>The Principles and Practice of Medicine</i>
			42–55	Becomes acknowledged as the leading generalist-consultant in the English-speaking world
55 and beyond	Consolidation	Wrap up loose ends; reflect on how one has utilized time and opportunities; mentor younger generations; age gracefully; accept mortality and plan accordingly	55	Becomes Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, a position with few demands
			55–70	Becomes an acknowledged spokesperson for medicine and its interface with society
			70	Dies of complications from pneumonia with "the courage befitting a man"

^aFrom numerous sources, including Carl Jung (1875–1961), Erik Erikson (1902–1994), and Daniel J. Levinson (1920–1994). Shown here is an earlier simplification of the adult life cycle; for more recent discussion, see article by Gilleard and Higgs.²⁵

for a mild cephalohematoma after its mother went into labor sitting on the commode of a Pullman car. The Mexico City, Mexico, *Herald* was not so merciful: "Canada must take all the responsibility for that joker of continental size, Dr. William Osler." The Montreal, Canada, *Gazette* saw it differently:

Americans may not know that with all their ability to see a joke they are world-famous for not being able to take a joke; and a more jovial joker, a more epigrammatic, and witty member of society than Dr. Osler never made after-dinner speeches.

The Cleveland, Ohio, *Press* asked, "Have we Americans yet appreciated the doctor's humor?"

"To Oslerize" entered the American lexicon as a synonym for euthanasia, but the *Baltimore News* went further:

Osler, v.—To retire, to be retired. Example: "I am about to Osler." "We have decided to Osler the janitor."

Oslerization—The process of applying the Osler. Example: "Your services are no longer required."

Oslerummi—Those who have been Oslered or Oslerized; divided into two classes—the material but declining and the spiritual but declined.

Osleresque—Having the quality of early retirement; prematurely languid; that tired feeling at 40.

Osleritis—See lazy.

Some newspapers—for example, the Mayville, Wisconsin, *News*; the Bay City, Michigan, *Tribune*; the Creston, Iowa,

American; and the Lewiston, Montana, *Argus*—suggested that Oslerization should begin with the US Senate.

Jokes had their variations. Thus, the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, *Bulletin* told beneath the heading "An Osler Convert": "Kin ye give an old tramp ten cents, mum?' 'What for? To buy whiskey?' 'No mum. To buy chloroform.'"

The Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal* quipped beneath the heading "Oslerized": "Kin ye help a poor old tramp, mum?' 'Why don't you go to work and try to be of some use in the world?' 'Alas, mum, I'm past de useful stage. I'm forty-two years old.'"

Would-be poets also had fun. A common theme was that aging bachelors were of little or no use to women aspiring to marriage unless they happened to be rich. The last verse of a poem entitled "The Summer Girl to Doctor Osler," submitted to the St. Joseph, Missouri, *News-Press*, reads:

So poison them, and thus make room
For youths who understand
The soda fountain's subtle charm
When summer rules the land.
Remove the fossils, yes, indeed,
But when you ply your pills,
You might just spare a few papas
To liquidate the bills.

The Cincinnati, Ohio, *Commercial Tribune* reported that a young woman, when asked whether men at 60 should be chloroformed, replied emphatically: "Some of the richest catches have been men of 60 or more. They have their uses."

LESSONS FOR TODAY

Commentators on Osler's "Fixed Period" address often focus on the continued productivity of many older people. Osler may be his own best example in this regard, because he made himself useful during his subsequent life at Oxford (1905–1919). Some additional lessons include the following.

First, don't "go viral" with information you would not want to become wide public knowledge. In his 1897 address on "Internal Medicine as a Vocation," Osler warned members of the New York Academy of Medicine:

In the life of every successful 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.²²

Today this admonition should include the Delilah of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. A single post (Facebook) or tweet (Twitter) can compromise prospects for employment, not to mention the shame and public humiliation.²³

Second, understand the adult life cycle as it pertains to a medical career. The sentence immediately preceding Osler's quip about "Anthony Trollope's suggestion of a college and chloroform" reads: "The teacher's life should have three periods, study until twenty-five, investigation until forty, profession until sixty, at which age I would have him retired on a double allowance."¹ William Osler's major career choices correspond almost precisely to older accounts of the adult life cycles (Table 1), which, however, may be less relevant today because people are living longer and frequently postponing retirement. Here is the main point: medical students and young physicians should understand that their roles will probably change over time and plan accordingly.

Finally, and as Osler was doing in 1905 when he gave the address, it behooves us to weigh options as we age. Osler made a clear statement to this effect during a 1913 memorial to Dr. Robert Fletcher (1823–1912), who, starting at age 53, served 36 years as assistant librarian to the Surgeon General's Library in Washington, DC (now the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland):

One of two things happens after sixty, when old age takes a fellow by the hand. Either the rascal takes charge as general factotum, and you are in his grip body and soul; or you take him by the neck at the first encounter, and after a good shaking make him go your way. This Dr. Fletcher did so successfully ... Of few men could it be said more truthfully, "He saw life steadily and saw it whole."²⁴

Might we do likewise.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Dr. Henry Beatty Wilson and his daughter, Hilary Cosby, for donating the scrapbook that made this study possible. The scrapbook was compiled by Dr. Harry Eugene Wilson, a member of the class of 1914 of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. I thank Nancy McCall of the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, Baltimore, Maryland, for

making the scrapbook available for study and Charles T. Ambrose for comments on the article.

1. Osler W. The Fixed Period. In: Osler W, ed. *Aequanimitas with Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia, PA: The Blakiston Company; 1932:373–393.
2. Ambrose CT. William Osler and the "Fixed Period" of creativity. *J Med Biogr*. 2017 Jan 1 [Epub ahead of print]. doi:10.1177/0967772017730014.
3. Bean WB. Osler, Trollope and the Fixed Period. *Trans Am Clin Climatol Assoc*. 1967;78:242–248.
4. Berk SL. Sir William Osler, ageism, and "the Fixed Period." A secret revealed. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 1989;37:263–266.
5. Davidow Hirshbein L. William Osler and the Fixed Period: Conflicting medical and popular opinions about old age. *Arch Intern Med*. 2001;161:2074–2078. doi:10.1001/archinte.161.17.2074.
6. Francis WW. Osler and the reporters. With an unpublished note on "The Fixed Period." *CMAJ*. 1949;61:68–69.
7. Fye WB. William Osler's departure from North America. The price of success. *N Engl J Med*. 1989;320:1425–1431. doi:10.1056/NEJM198905253202123.
8. Hogan DB. Osler, aging and now. *Ann R Coll Physicians Surg Can*. 1984;17:133.
9. Hogan DB. Osler's "The Fixed Period." *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 1989;37:917.
10. Johnson HA. Osler recommends chloroform at sixty. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc*. 1996;59:24–26.
11. Kurtzman NA. Osler was right. *Semin Nephrol*. 2004;24:292–296.
12. Penfield W, Pseudo S. Pseudo-senility: Osler's dictum reconsidered. *Perspect Biol Med*. 1961;4:437–444.
13. Roland CG. The infamous William Osler. *JAMA*. 1965;193:436–438. doi:10.1001/jama.1965.03090060026006.
14. Swick HM. *Oslerized: A musical response to William Osler's valedictory address "The Fixed Period."* In: Baroness JA, Bryan CS, eds. *The Persisting Osler-IV. Selected Transactions of the American Osler Society 2001–2010*. Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications; 2011:191–196.
15. Viets HR. William Osler and "The Fixed Period." *Bull Hist Med*. 1962;36:368–370.
16. White W. Re-echoes of Sir William Osler's "The Fixed Period." *Bull Hist Med*. 1937;5:937–940.
17. Zeman FD. Beard's legal responsibility in old age, its possible relationship to Sir William Osler's Fixed Period address. *N Y State J Med*. 1954;54:1527–1529.
18. Cushing H. *The Life of Sir William Osler*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1925:664–672. doi:10.1056/NEJM192506251922623.
19. Davison WC. Sir William Osler: reminiscences. *Arch Intern Med*. 1949;84:110–128. doi:10.1001/archinte.1949.00230010120021.
20. Accession number 2015–057, The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Institutions, Baltimore, Maryland.
21. Popp RK. Information, industrialization, and the business of press clippings, 1880–1925. *J Am Hist*. 2014;101:427–453. doi:10.1093/jahist/jau373.
22. Osler W. Internal medicine as a vocation. In: Osler W, ed. *Aequanimitas with Other Addresses to Medical Students, Nurses and Practitioners of Medicine*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia, PA: The Blakiston Company; 1932:131–145.
23. Whitcomb SB, Bryan C, Dib D. Discretionary authenticity: how to share, how much, and with whom. In: Whitcomb SB, Bryan C, Dib D, eds. *The Twitter Job Search Guide: Find a Job and Advance Your Career in Just 15 Minutes a Day*. Indianapolis, IN: Jist Works; 2010:164–168.
24. Osler W. Robert Fletcher. *CMAJ*. 1913:19:22.
25. Gilleard C, Higgs P. Connecting life span development with the sociology of the life course: a new direction. *Sociology*. 2016;50:301–315. doi:10.1177/0038038515577906.