

Doctors as Writers

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Abstract - Literature has seen many doctors turned writers. Some of the eminent authors viz. Arthur Conan Doyle, A J Cronin and Somerset Maugham gave up their profession of medicine to become men of letters. What made them do so and what is the highest common factor between them for achieving the exquisite writing skill?

The present article has established a hypothesis, why particularly doctors have developed their keen interest in literature. While having their training as a medical student and consultant they have to present condensed reports in which there is no room for personal cranks and tares, comments and explanations. During their training period they come across many people and everyone has a story to tell. By putting together both, stories and an organised, disciplined method, they have a fantastic tale to tell.

Keywords -Doctor, Medicine, Author, Non-Judgemental, Succinct.

‘To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life.’

– W. Somerset Maugham

Doctors observe the vignettes of life. A patient’s story is just a vignette of his or her life – it is not a complete story. But collect various vignettes of life, add something of your imagination or even a part of your own life, assimilate and collate them... you have a complete story in front of you! It is no wonder that very often a novel written by a doctor is based on experiences of his or her own life. At this stage the doctor-writer has moved up; perhaps practising medicine has been given up. The doctor is often reminded that the time available is limited and the body is fragile and perishable. This leads to more compassion for the characters of his/her stories.

A medical student passes through a very strenuous training during his career which professional writers do not undergo. If it were only possible it would be advisable for all aspiring writers to spend a few years in the practice of medicine. This profession offers a ringside view of life with all its vicissitudes. But medical practice is itself a whole-time profession

and a trained medical practitioner cannot afford to waste his precious training on a different profession. Medicine requires long and difficult hours to master and no parent would want his child to move away from medicine after the long hours and huge amounts of money spent. But many doctors do move away to the profession of writing perhaps as a pastime or perhaps even as a whole-time profession.

A doctor has a view of life as it evolves through all its phases — right from conception in the mother’s womb to its final journey to the ‘tomb’.

As a medical student one has to present one’s ‘case’ to one’s consultant and tell the latter what the trainee has learnt about the case. This includes the history of the patient’s illness, the findings on examination of the patient, the provisional diagnosis, the suggested line of investigation and the treatment to be advised. This might sound simple enough but it has to be done in a very short, disciplined and precise manner so as to satisfy the scientific benchmark stipulated by the experienced mentor- consultants. Forget that it is a medical ward and you have a story to interest you.

The approach of a doctor has thus to follow a style that is succinct and tells you everything of interest, without uncalled for repetitions and without any embellishment. The consultant would ask the student to be perfectly neutral, nonjudgemental and nonmoralizing. A doctor has to tackle his case as it presents itself to him, not as it might have been presented had the patient been more moralistic. If a patient had been more moralistic his disease also would have presented itself somewhat differently. But this aspect of life is not for the doctor to decide: let preachers tackle this ethical and moralistic side of life. The doctor’s approach has to be precise, succinct and non judgemental.

A doctor becomes keenly observant even as the patient enters the consultation chamber. The doctor can observe that the patient is dragging his feet even as the attendant is supporting him while coming in.

The doctor can also observe that there is an asymmetry in the patient's face. The doctor has made a mental diagnosis of stroke even before there has been any exchange of words.

Every doctor has something of a Sherlock Holmes in him if only there were an Arthur Conan Doyle to record it. When Arthur Conan Doyle obtained his Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery degree, he drew a caricature of himself captioned 'Licensed to Kill'. He might have thought that his self-deprecatory, humorous epithet of himself would bring him a stream of patients. He started a practice in London but not a single patient ever crossed his door! So, to kill time he started writing. He lost even his claim to the 'Licensed to Kill' epithet which was later used as an honorific by Ian Fleming for his James Bond.

Conan Doyle used his diagnostic skills acquired during his medical training not for what ailed a person but for diagnosing what ailed the criminal system of the society. He might not have diagnosed a single person's disease but he did indeed solve quite a few criminal cases. A notable example was the case of a famous person who was exonerated in a messy case because of the doctor's logic. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle became so famous for his writings that he decided to get rid of his creation and had Sherlock Holmes killed. But this brought such an outrage that he had to resurrect his famous creation and continue his writings. Sherlock Holmes continues to entertain viewers on the TV screen and people continue to visit his Baker Street residence even today.

'Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other. Though it is irregular it is less boring this way, and, besides, neither of them loses anything through my infidelity.' - Anton Chekhov

Anton Chekhov's father had been born a serf. By his efforts he brought himself and his children out of serfdom. Anton studied Greek and Latin classics in a school meant for Greek boys. He acquired the best education available at the time. Anton lived alone and supported himself by coaching younger students. His father had gone bankrupt and had moved to Moscow along with the rest of his family. In 1879 Chekhov, too, moved to Moscow and joined his family. He supported his family by freelance earnings as a journalist and a writer of comic

sketches. He harboured no firm political and social views—this irked his contemporaries. He went to the far away island of Sakhalin covering a distance of 6,000 miles (9,650 km). He studied local conditions and returned unscathed from this hazardous journey. He published his findings as a research thesis. He wrote many short stories and plays. He graduated in medicine from Moscow University and continued to practise even as he indulged in his literary pursuits. It is possible that his hard work in Sakhalin led to a decline in his physical state. He died of haemorrhage in his lungs due to tuberculosis which he obviously contracted during his interaction with the convicts in the penal colony of Sakhalin. He did everything (even dying) in style—he sat up, his doctors gave him an injection; he drank a glass of champagne, then lay on his left side and slept quietly like a child sleeping; he never woke up from this sleep. His writings have a clear imprint of his training as a doctor. His style is laconic, his writings are non judgemental.

A doctor recording the history of a patient's ailment must write succinctly with no space for verbosity. It should be clear enough and with adequate details, so as to be accessible even after a long period of time not only to himself but also to his co-professionals who go through it. The doctor does not deliver a lecture on his diagnosis and treatment. If the patient comes again with the same ailment the doctor does not refuse to treat him or her.

'I do not know of any better training for the writer's profession than that of spending time in medicine' said W Somerset Maugham.

William Somerset Maugham lost his mother to tuberculosis. He lost his father to cancer two years later. The so-orphaned child of 10 lived with his paternal uncle who was a vicar in Kent. He had been very attached to his mother whose photograph he always kept with him until he died at the age of 91. At 16 he moved to Germany where he studied literature and philosophy. He spent five years in London as a medical student. He had been writing since the age of 15. He was happy to live in the lively city of London where he was happy to meet "low" people to the consternation of those who knew him. He was grateful that he could see people at the time of heightened anxiety and the lack of meaning in their lives. 'I saw how men died. I saw how they bore pain. I saw how hope looked like, fear and relief.' He continued writing even while studying medicine.

Liza of Lambeth drew its details from his experiences as a medical student. Its first print-run was sold out in a matter of weeks. He had qualified as a doctor but now he dropped medicine in order to pursue a life of a man of letters. His critics viewed his literary work with disdain. His prose was plain and unadorned but his works continued to sell phenomenally. His novel *Of Human Bondage* continues to be read even today. In 1947 he instituted the Somerset Maugham Award. Among the notable winners was V S Naipaul.

He was a nonbeliever, an agnostic. He observed that the evidence adduced to prove the truth of one religion was of very much the same sort as that adduced to prove the truth of another. He did not believe in God, nor in an afterlife. We have seen how medicine affected his work even though he himself discarded the practice of it for the sake of literature which, unlike his achievements in medicine, would survive him.

There have been and there continue to be many doctors who have written excellent fiction and nonfiction but I would like to conclude with A J Cronin.

A J Cronin was a Scottish doctor who obtained his medical degree from the University of Glasgow. Unlike many other doctors turned writers he writes very judgements and his writings display a very deep religious streak. His first novel 'Hatter's Castle' was an immediate bestseller. His novel, 'The Citadel' was well received not only in the UK but also in other countries like France, Germany, Russia and the USA. Interestingly, the Nazis used it to highlight their superiority over others. In *The Citadel* he showed the deficiencies of not only medicine but also the bureaucratic system of the time. He pleaded for adopting a scientific system of medicine and pointed out the corruptions at all levels of society. He was well qualified to do so. He started life as an assistant to a General Practitioner in Wales. With the acquisitions of more coveted diplomas MD and MRCP he decided to move on to London where for a time he decided to flow with time and succumb to it.

He desired easy money. With the success of his novels he became rich and turned his back to medicine. Lack of medical ethics would not haunt him anymore. His style is simple, straight forward and direct. He was soon ignored by his readers but

he had touched a raw nerve of the society. Though he himself never advocated state control of medicine, *The Citadel* is believed to have led to the incarnation of the National Health Service of the UK. It is said that his shaking up of the electorate led to the downfall of Churchill who had won World War II for Britain and led the somewhat modest Clement Attlee to the highest office.

His 'Adventures in Two Worlds' has many autobiographical underpinnings but one cannot be sure about all that is portrayed in the *Adventures*. The margin between fact and fiction seems to get blurred for him. He is now more remembered for his shaking of the society than for his literary excellence.

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