



Editorial

Emeritus, old age, William Osler and William Dock

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In perusing the latest issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the official publication of the American College of Physicians, that I just received, I turned to p. I-5 and noted Drs. Huth, Sox, Fletcher, Fletcher and Davidson all listed as editors emeriti. This benevolent listing is obviously a tribute by the current editor in chief Laine to her predecessors. One of the benefits of getting old is to be honored with the title of emeritus. We all have to grow old. Growing old is a natural process of human life. It is inevitable and universal.

William Osler's ideas about old age were well known [1]. I am also reminded of the approach to old age of another great physician of the twentieth century and my mentor, William Dock [2,3]. Osler was the mentor of Dock's father, George Dock, and the two remained close friends [4].

Dock's approach to old age was best illustrated in his classic article in 1971 [5].

"... To those about to die, old age seemed marvelous. But not to Socrates at 70, for Xenophon tells us that when he had been sentenced to die and his friends asked why he had not tried to defend himself at his trial, he said he preferred the lethal drink to old age, the sink into which all miseries flowed. ... When Charles de Gaulle wrote 'Old age is a shipwreck,' I could have said that I had known that for decades. But I had also learned that there was a silver lining, that most of the aged are not unhappy most of the time. Some of them, after being shipwrecked, made the best of life on desert islands. ..."

"When Osler retired from his professorship at Johns Hopkins, at the age of 56, he gave an address titled *Fixed Period*. He told his astonished auditors that it would be better for society if, as a

matter of course, all men over 60 were retired from business, professional, and political life."

"Like Osler, I believed no one should be a department executive in a medical school for more than 20 years. ... In medical schools the retirement age should be 62, when my father and Harvey Cushing chose to retire from being department heads and to leave their hospital posts. Perhaps the Oslerian 60 would be still better. My father, like Osler, retired to a distant small town. There he practiced until he was 86. I also might have been able to find work in a small community, but since my wife, like George M. Cohan, believes that 'When you're away from old Broadway, you're only camping out,' I did not need to move. My mother, in St. Louis, had been longing for Pasadena for a decade." [5].

In an interview with Weisse, Dock stated "Osler left Hopkins at 56. Fifty-six was the age that Hippocrates chose as the beginning of senility. Osler was a great Hippocrates and *Religio Medici* man, so he had firm feelings about what doctors should do, and one of them was: "Here's your coat. What's your hurry?" [6].

Old age is relative. As Bernard Baruch (1870–1965) once said, "I will never be an old man. To me, old man is always fifteen years older than I am." Pope Clement III (elected 1187; died 1191) said, "Young men be not proud in the presence of a decaying old man; he was once that which you are, he is now that which you will be." [7]

One's ability to function should never be judged by his chronologic age, but by his physiologic age. Take, for example, Tadeus Reichstein. He shared the 1950 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for discoveries relating to the hormones of the adrenal cortex and published his 1992 paper "The phloroglucinols of *Dryopteris stenolepis*" (C.J. Widen, P. Ayas, T. Reichstein: *Annales Botanicæ Fennici*, 29: 41–54) at the age of 93 [8]. Linus Pauling, winner of two Nobel Prizes (one for chemistry in 1954 and one for peace in 1962) published in 1994 at the age of 93 a "Technical Comment" in *Science* (Triethylsilyl cations" *Science*, 263:983) [8].

Another example is William Dock. In 1980, at the age of 82, he wrote one of the most significant articles on Korotkoff sounds, which was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* [9]. According to Arnold Relman, the editor of the journal, Dock was among the oldest, if not the very oldest, to be published in that journal [2]. Then, there is Richard Bing of the Taussig–Bing syndrome [10]. He was the first to call attention to the cardiovascular risks of cyclooxygenase-2-inhibitors in his 2002 article published at the age of 93 [11]. In 2009 when he was 100 years old [12], he wrote on the history of surgical treatment of congenital heart disease including the Glenn and Fontan operations [13].

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