

The medical student role in the pandemic response

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“Humanity has but three great enemies: fever, famine, and war; of these by far the greatest, by far the most terrible, is fever.”

—William Osler, 1896¹

Often regarded as the father of modern medicine, William Osler’s insight and wisdom with regard to the practice of medicine, the character of the apt physician, and human behavior raises question as to how history’s greatest doctor would respond to the current pandemic. Perhaps Osler’s greatest trait was his ability to consider how clinical medicine influences all facets of society, and his commitment to medicine as a practice of public interest. The COVID-19 pandemic is a great opportunity for us to reflect on our roles as members of the different groups that make up our society.

As students, we have a responsibility to turn the current situation into an opportunity to learn about infectious disease, the principles of public health, and disaster and bioterrorism response. Our future jobs in medicine will be the treatment of patients with complex diseases within the array of biopsychosocial contexts in our communities. It is paramount that we capitalize on this opportunity to establish a strong foundation for understanding these concepts.

My role as a student is to make the most of my courses, to learn and practice as much as possible. However, the most important learning that we will do during this pandemic comes from observing and emulating the attitudes and practices of physicians who are handling an unprecedented emergency. Anybody can sit down and learn about the pathophysiology of a virus, but the benefit of attending a school of medicine and spending time with practicing physicians comes from the socialization into the practice of medicine absorbed from mentors and attendings.

The true weight of the role of the physician in society is often underemphasized until disaster strikes—without health, there is nothing. As future physicians, we have a responsibility to educate our patients, to care for and support the practice and well-being of our colleagues, and to treat disease and pestilence. We have a responsibility to



William Osler treating a patient, probably in Johns Hopkins Hospital. Osler is seated next to the patient’s bed, 1889-1905. Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University

maintain order and to disseminate information accurately and responsibly. Without the tireless work of physicians and nurses, we would be in a much worse place than we are now.

While each day is frightening and uncertain, it is important to remember that we were called to medicine to take on challenges like these, in spite of fear.

Finally, we have a responsibility to mankind. We must practice good hygiene, listen to the guidelines and recommendations of the medical community, and support each other as members of the same Earth—helping those in need helps us all. Regardless of whether we are medical students, physicians, or neither, the current pandemic affects all of us, and we all have a role to play in minimizing the hardships of our neighbors. As Louis Pasteur said:

One doesn’t ask of one who suffers: what is your country and what is your religion? One merely says, you suffer, this is enough for me, you belong to me and I shall help you.²

References

1. Osler W. The study of the fevers of the South. *JAMA*. 1896; 26: 999–1004.
2. Dubos R. Louis Pasteur: Free Lance of Science. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 1950.

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