What I learnt when writing a book of medical education quotations

Dr Kieran Walsh,
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1. Our current generation didn’t invent medical education reform

In considering the usual medical curriculum of today, and asking where in it clinical science is to play its part, I would start from the statement that this curriculum is already overloaded.

Thomas Lewis

Lewis T. The Huxley lecture on clinical science within the university. *BMJ* 1935;1:631

Time may be gained by the simple and common-sense process of striking out of the curriculum teaching that oppresses and bewilders the student, that distracts his attention from the real object of his study, that loads his memory without training his intellect.

Robert Barnes

Barnes R. An Address on Obstetric Medicine and its Position in Medical Education. *BMJ* 1875;2:33
1. Our current generation didn’t invent medical education reform

I am dying with the help of too many physicians.

323 BC

Alexander the Great

He who wishes to practice surgery must go to war.

400 BC

Hippocrates
2. But if ideas have been around forever the pace of change has been slow

No country has produced so many excellent analyses of the present defects of medical education as has Britain, and no country has done less to implement them.

George Pickering


It is so hard to get anything out of the dead hand of medical tradition!

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Medical Essays, ‘Currents and Counter-currents in Medical Science’ 1860
2. But if ideas have been around forever the pace of change has been slow

Conservatism and old fogeyism are totally different things; the motto of the one is, Prove all things, and hold fast that which is good; of the other, Prove nothing, but hold fast that which is old.

William Osler


Would you know the signs by which in man or an institution you may recognise old fogeyism? They are three: First, a state of blissful happiness and contentment with things as they are; secondly, a supreme conviction that the condition of other people and other institutions is one of pitiable inferiority; thirdly, a fear of change which not alone perplexes but appals.

William Osler

2. But if ideas have been around forever the pace of change has been slow

The war for time and students' minds is a sad, futile, self destructive activity in many medical schools.

John Last

Last JM. Personal View. *BMJ* 1985;290:1900
3. We will never work out an evidence based way of delivering medical education in all contexts

The arguments for and against different methods of teaching medical students how to be a doctor have been raging for decades and will continue to run and run. A study that provides firm evidence of the superiority of one method over another will, I wager, never be done.

Paul McCoubrie
McCoubrie P. The PBL debate is a distraction. *BMJ* (Published 21 July 2004)

Some debates in medical education can appear to the outsider to have an almost religious fervour to them, which may be off putting.

Stewart Petersen
3. We will never work out an evidence based way of delivering medical education in all contexts

It is well acknowledged that RCTs are rarely if ever relevant in educational research.

Julian Archer

Archer J. Medical education research: Reasons to be cheerful. *BMJ* 2007;335:414

I have now seen a good many years of student life, and have watched the results of a good many educational experiments, and as the result of the experience, the advice I offer you is to attend all the practical classes you can.

William Rutherford

4. It might be better to spend time getting the practical things right

You can not learn surgery sitting on your ass.

Ward Griffen


I have read many persuasive reports about medical education, but they generally overlook the essential point, that if you have first-class students and first-class teachers the rest matters very little.

Samson Wright

Wright S. Remuneration of Teachers. *BMJ* 1948;2:47
4. It might be better to spend time getting the practical things right

Every surgeon has to do his first appendix.

Lawrence Cohn

Cohn L. Closing the gap between professional teaching and practice. *BMJ* (Published 27 April 2001).

The objection I have to much of my medical education is not that I memorised things, but that I memorised the wrong things.

David Smyth

5. We’ve got to get the funding of medical education right and at the moment it is a mess

All physicians leaving a poorer jurisdiction for a richer one should be obligated to pay for the true cost of their education. Or else the receiving county or province or state should pay the state where they had subsidised education and professional training.

Alexander Jablanczy

Jablanczy A. The cost of an MD. *BMJ* (Published 26 January 2001)

The education is so expensive that none enter upon the study except the sons of men of independent fortune.

John Banks

Banks J. Preliminary Medical Education and the Medical Curriculum. *BMJ* 1890;2:1213
5. We’ve got to get the funding of medical education right and at the moment it is a mess

The cost of medical education has also increased a good deal these last few years, thus affecting those who are putting their sons into the profession.

Arthur Hawkyard

Hawkyard A. Contract practice and the medical profession. *BMJ* 1910;2:1095

Money is the root of all progress.

Iain MacLeod

6. The past (hopefully)

To be a Member of the College (achieved by examination) means nothing at all. One must be elected a fellow.

John Rowan Wilson

1980

At the College all members are fellows (achieved by examination) and theoretically all fellows are equal just as theoretically all officers are gentlemen.

John Rowan Wilson

1980
Whoever it was who claimed to have been educated mainly during the holidays must have been an Old Boy of my medical school.

Michael Simpson

7. The future

All is now flux in medical education where once all was stasis.

Chris McManus


At the end of their careers, physicians tend to wax poetic about the art of medicine and how it is being lost. (The same art seems to be lost every generation.)

Ezekiel Emanuel

Emanuel EJ. Changing Premed Requirements and the Medical Curriculum. JAMA 2006;296(9):1128-1131.
7. The future

The future of American medical education is, like all other higher developments, simply in the hands of the only aristocracy we strive for – the aristocracy of an enlightened public opinion.

Fielding Garrison

Introduction to the History of Medicine, 2nd edition, Preface. 1922

Somewhere betwixt and between the extremes of the dynamic power seeker who triples his efforts as he loses sight of his goals and the ineffectual one driven about by every casual breeze, we find good deans of good medical schools who produce the inspiration and leadership as well as exert the firm hand of the helmsman in just the right combination.

William Bean

7. The future

When I was a boy I wanted to know all about the clouds and the grasses, and why the leaves changed colour in the autumn, I watched the ants, bees, birds, tadpoles, and caddis-worms: I pestered people with questions about what nobody knew or cared anything about.

John Hunter

8. Putting together a book of quotes is a pain – because you’ve got to get it right. Who said?

Play it again Sam

Play it once, Sam, for old times' sake, play As *Time Goes By*

Ingrid Bergman – not Humphrey Bogart
8. Putting together a book of quotes is a pain – because you’ve got to get it right. Who said?

Let them eat cake

Let them eat cake – Marie Antoinette just didn’t say it
8. Putting together a book of quotes is a pain – because you’ve got to get it right. Who said?

Crisis? What crisis?

Well, that's a judgment that you are making. I promise you that if you look at it from outside, and perhaps you're taking rather a parochial view at the moment, I don't think that other people in the world would share the view that there is mounting chaos.

Jim Callaghan
8. Putting together a book of quotes is a pain – because you’ve got to get it right. Who said?

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned

Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned

William Congreve

The Mourning Bride, Act III, Scene VIII
9. Don’t talk for too long

A first year medical student recently commented to me that in every lecture he attended he fell asleep after 45 minutes or so. Of course, with my years of experience of medical education I reassured him that with time and some effort he would be able to achieve this in as little as ten minutes or less.

Eugene Milne

Milne E. Papers and Reports Miscellanea: From Mindy's Institute, Broadway. BMJ 1985;291:1822

No sleep is so deeply refreshing as that which, during lectures, Morpheus invites us so insistenty to enjoy.

Peter Medawar

Medawar, P. B. (1979) Advice To a Young Scientist. New York, HarperCollins
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