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# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

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McGill University, Montreal, Canada

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## SIR WILLIAM OSLER'S VIEWS ON EUTHANASIA

**I**n Sir William Osler's valedictory address given at his departure from Johns Hopkins University, he briefly and whimsically mentions Anthony Trollope's novel *The Fixed Period*. The section of the speech that was later deemed so extraordinary is as follows:

"The plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college into which at 60 men retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform. That incalculable benefits might follow such a scheme is

apparent to anyone who, like myself, is nearing the limit, and who has made a careful study of the calamities which may befall men during the seventh and eighth decades. Still more when he contemplates the many evils... they perpetuate unconsciously, and with impunity. As it can be maintained that all the great advances have come from men under 40, so the history of the world shows that a very large proportion of the evils may be traced to the sexagenarians — nearly all the great mistakes politically and socially, all the worst poems... not a few of the bad sermons and speeches." <sup>1</sup>

The delivery and subsequent publication of his address was fairly calmly accepted by the medical profession. Although Osler received little adverse criticism from his colleagues, the popular reaction was much different. Osler was represented as espousing the killing off of older people. Like the ancient Spartans who threw their aged off cliffs, Osler was pictured as plotting to push the elderly off bridges. Cushing bitterly notes that Osler's speech was represented as "the heartless views of a cold scientist who would condemn man as a productive machine." <sup>2</sup>

Osler was confused and distressed by the commotion caused by a speech which he viewed as innocent and playful. "What a tempest my innocent and jocos remarks raised! Such a torrent of abuse & misunderstanding began to flow in that I took my old Master, Plato's advice & crept under the shelter of a wall until the storm blew over — working hard and reading nothing about it." <sup>3</sup> Cushing believed that "it required no great degree of intelligence to distinguish between the serious and the jocular in what Osler had said and if rightly read," he claimed "no one's feelings should have been ruffled in the slightest." <sup>4</sup>

While it is generally accepted that Osler's comments were meant to be humorous, many theories have been forwarded which attempt to explain what in fact he really meant by his speech. These explana-



Sir William Osler during one of his last bouts of illness, reading in bed  
Photograph taken by his nurse Agnes Gallop, ca. 1918.

The Osler Library, amongst its numerous other functions, is the hub of a growing undergraduate and graduate teaching program in the history of medicine. The Department of Social Studies of Medicine offers courses not only to medical students, but also to students in the Faculties of Arts and Science. Last year, a student from the English Department named Shelagh Jones enrolled in "Health and the Healer in Western Society", and decided to write her term paper on Osler, using Osler's own books as her primary source. An abbreviated version of her essay is the lead article for this issue of the Newsletter. Osler intended his magnificent Library to be used by students and that intention is being fulfilled — albeit perhaps not exactly in the way Osler envisioned! — even today.

tions range from direct and simple to increasingly indirect and complex. D.B. Hogan simply observes that Osler identified Montaigne's assertion that "at the ages of 55-60 we should probably be sent to the fireside" as the inspiration for the address.<sup>5</sup> More complex and indirect is Berk's proposal that Osler's inspiration comes from the *Religio Medici*. He cites the following passage as Osler's inspiration:

"... age does not rectify, but incurvate our natures, turning bad dispositions into worse habits, and (like diseases) brings on incurable vices: for every day as we grow weaker in age, we grow stronger in sin: and the number of our days doth but make our sins more innumerable." <sup>6</sup>

Berk admits that although his theory can never be demonstrated, it is equally impossible to refute it. However, I believe his theory can be questioned in two ways. While it is probable that Osler's life and thoughts were very much influenced by the *Religio Medici*, it is unlikely that Osler would uncritically have accepted all the positions and ideas contained within the book. In addition, Osler, who was raised in the Anglican religious tradition, had a deeply personal and enlightened view of a beneficent God which would seem to run counter to the views expressed in the quotation selected by Berk.

Berk's explanation is too abstract and complex to be entirely satisfactory. A more likely motivation for Osler's wish that men be allowed to retire from life comes directly from the circumstances of his own life. Osler might have been expressing his longing for a respite. A recent death in the family and his strenuous circuit of speeches, campaigns and weighty responsibilities were draining him as he neared his sixtieth birthday. On one occasion when Osler clarified himself, he states that it is his "belief that the real work of life is done before the 40th year and that after the 60th year it would be best for the world and best for ourselves if men rested from their labours."<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion that Sir William Osler's address did not advocate euthanasia is easily reached. This debate sparks an infinitely more interesting question: What were Osler's attitudes towards euthanasia?

Fortunately for the medical historian, Sir William Osler was a keen collector of medical books on diverse topics. Even more fortunately, Sir William zealously and conscientiously collected articles and personal correspondence which he pasted into the flyleaves of his books. Of special interest to us in this inquiry is William Munk's book *Euthanasia: Medical Treatment in Aid of an Easy Death* (London, 1887; Bibl.Osl. 3472) and Maurice Maeterlinck's work *Death* (London, 1911; Bibl.Osl. 5108): books which contain widely differing

views on euthanasia. Pasted into the flyleaves of these books are several articles and personal letters which serve as valuable evidence of Osler's attitudes regarding euthanasia.

Munk's book considers euthanasia to be "an easy, gentle and placid death" (4) and views the doctor's role as to "smooth the bed of death" (5). Munk denounces any act which could risk the patient's life, such as the administration of large doses of opium to eliminate pain, as "to do so would be to risk throwing the patient into a sleep from which he may not wake" (86). Any such action performed by a health care giver is denounced as a "barbarity", and therefore it is "incumbent on his [the patient's] friends to preserve him from the hands of executioners" (94). Maeterlinck, on the other hand, calls the protraction of pain a barbaric act (16), a superstition, and believes that allowing unnecessary pain to persist is a "criminal act" (19). Maeterlinck complains that doctors are "like misers [who] measure out drop by drop the clemency and peace which they grudge and which they ought to lavish, dreading lest they should weaken the last resistance" (22). Maeterlinck strongly favours active (or positive) euthanasia, namely the administration of a dose of medication, in the case of incurable disease and/or mental or physical abnormalities, which would result in death.<sup>8</sup>

Osler's response to Maeterlinck's book is expressed in the article "Sir Wm. Osler and Maeterlinck" (really his own letter to the editor of the *Spectator*, 4 Nov. 1911) which he thoughtfully pasted into the back of *Death*. "As a student for many years of the art and of the act of dying", Osler wrote, "I read with eagerness Maeterlinck's recent Essay, only, I must confess, to be disappointed." Osler protests against "the chill of the charnel-house" generated by Maeterlinck's descriptions of the act of dying: "'The Tortures of the Last Illness,' 'The Uselessly Prolonged Torments,' 'The Unbearable Memories of the Chamber of Pain.'" Alongside Munk, Osler stresses the absence of pain which accompanies the last stage of death. "The truth is," writes Osler, "an immense majority of all die as they are born — oblivious." Osler strongly objects to the "hysterical statements" Maeterlinck makes. As examples of the "hysterical", "unfortunate" comments, Osler quotes: "Who has not at a bedside twenty times wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore mercy" and "all doctors consider it their first duty to protract as long as possible even the most excruciating convulsions of most hopeless agony."

Osler's objections to Maeterlinck's book shed light on his attitudes towards the process of dying. The arguments advanced by those supporting active euthanasia, such as the melodramatic declarations of

agonizing suffering by the terminally ill, are dismissed by Osler as based upon emotional hysteria rather than on scientific fact. In his essay, *Science and Immortality*, Osler reports of his careful survey of 500 cases in which he studied the sensations of the dying. Of the 500, most showed little awareness of pain or apprehension about dying.<sup>9</sup> The process of death naturally lulls the senses and deadens the consciousness of the dying, so that

"The tranquil spirit fails beneath its grasp,  
Without a groan, almost without fear,  
Resigned in peace to the necessity,  
Calm as a voyager to some distant land..." <sup>10</sup>

Two articles pasted into *Death*, presumably by Osler, stress that the deteriorating condition of the dying person, such as the "rapid, noisy, laboured respiration" are not indications of pain, but are rather a "mechanical condition".<sup>11</sup> "The moment of agony in death is a wide spread error"; the ignorant fears of the family, these articles stress, must not be the reason why people are put to death. (26)

The Shelley quotation above, with its religious overtone, points to Osler's attitudes towards death and euthanasia. Osler's own death, described in Cushing's biography, was characterized by calm acceptance. His last days were filled with good-byes to those he loved, with endearing concern for those around him and reading from books such as Milton's *Nativity and The Spirit of Man*. Osler's last days suggest that he supported Munk's view of the "memoria bene actae vitae, multorumque benefactorum recordatio," the retrospect of a well-spent life" (22). Dying is conceived as a process; through neatly tying up life's loose ends, the dying person is able to arrive at a calming and soothing sense of his or her accomplishments. Of his own dying, Osler had these words:

"Lady Osler had instructions to ask you to come, as I should not have considered it proper to go without your blessing, & without a personal message to my friends in the Society. The experience has been encouraging — discomfort of course, but no actual pain & except for the worry about leaving dear ones, singularly free from mental distress." <sup>13</sup>

Osler, a self proclaimed "student of the art and act of dying", agreed heartily with Munk's demand that "more attention be given to the management of the dying, or on the treatment best adapted to the relief of the suffering incident to that condition" (4). Munk's assertion that medical students needed to study euthanasia was based upon his belief that

"many of the sufferings of the death bed are not naturally or necessarily incident to the act of dying but are due to surrounding circumstances that admit to alteration or removal" (65).

Munk suggests that patients should be allowed to eat small light meals of their choice and indulge in some spirits. Osler enthusiastically believed in coddling and indulging the dying patient; while he, himself, was dying he ate lemons (of which he was very fond) and indulged in a nightly toddy.

Despite these general areas of agreement, Osler did not share Munk's unequivocal and uncompromising stance against any form of euthanasia. As mentioned previously, Munk denounced any act which potentially risks life, such as the administration of large doses of opium to eliminate pain. Munk declares that "no medicine should be given without a distinct — I had almost written urgent — need for it" (86). Osler was a strong believer in the power of opium, which he took throughout his last illness to ease his pain and help him sleep. (28) His only dissatisfaction with opium was its side effect; he complained that it gave him a "fuzzy-wuzzy feeling", dulling his brain and his ability to read. In the article "Sir William Osler and Maeterlinck", Osler cites Thomas Fuller: "when [a doctor] can keep life no longer in, he makes a fair and easy passage for it to go out." Osler's support for prescribing large doses of pain killers to block terminal pain does not directly correlate to a specific stance on euthanasia. However, it shows a willingness to risk death in order to alleviate pain. This position is more liberal than Munk, who believes it is his "first duty to protract his life by all practicable means, and to interpose [him]self between him and everything which may possibly aggravate his danger" (28).

It is through looking at Osler's own dying that we can see most clearly his position on the treatment of the dying. Osler was aware of his deteriorating condition and was active in its 'treatment' and control. Through many letters and the reports of his friends, we can sense Osler's wishes and his personal perception of the process of his death. The guidance that Osler exercised in his own dying suggests a certain attitude towards euthanasia and the death process. Osler's stance on euthanasia could be described as negative or passive. Passive euthanasia is commonly understood to be a refusal to perform "heroic measures", the implementation of medical treatments or strategies which could only prolong life without having a curative effect on the disease. Essentially, passive euthanasia is simply letting nature run its course. It is apparent that Osler did not support Maeterlinck's stance of positive euthanasia. However, it is equally apparent that Osler did not subscribe to Munk's vehement call for treatment to prolong life.

As Osler's illness progressed it was suggested by his doctors that he move to the Riviera where the weather was warm.

It was hoped that the warm weather would prolong his life. Osler replied that "he preferred to be translated to Heaven from his own bed." (29) Eventually, Osler's doctors suggested an operation. Although he submitted to this, afterwards he commented that "I have been too far across the river to go back and have it all over again." (30) It is apparent that Osler believed that, at some point, aggressive treatment should cease. He advocated palliative care, where the comfort, both physical and mental, of the patient takes precedence over any act which might prolong the dying. The patient's last days, Osler believed, should be consumed in activities such as good-byes and visits with loved ones, the preparation of a will, and the continuation of favorite intellectual pursuits. Essentially, Osler believed that the comfort of the dying patient should be paramount. They must not be thwarted by a useless and aggressive medical intervention from being allowed to enjoy their last days, creating a sense of closure of their life.

Since euthanasia was (and still is) illegal it is doubtful that Osler would have recorded any instance when he practised euthanasia in either the active or passive sense. However, I believe that it was possible, through analysis of Osler's intellectual pursuits, namely, his writing, reading and archival editorializing through pasted articles, and the accounts of his death and his personal letters, to arrive at a sense of his stance. As a deeply Christian man and as a very conscientious doctor Osler would not have supported active euthanasia. In addition, he disagreed with Maeterlinck and the active euthanasia supporter's melodramatic and hysterical emphasis on the nightmarish quality of the process of dying. Osler respected, above all, scientific proof. Those that supported active euthanasia did so, according to Osler, out of ignorance. He stressed that the "agony of death" was disproved through studies such as his own. On the other hand, Osler did not totally support the views represented in Munk. With Munk, Osler believed in a calm and easy death and believed that medical students should study euthanasia in order to aid those dying. However, he did not agree with Munk's conservative resistance to the use of palliative measures. Munk believed that aggressive treatment must be followed until the end and believed in the sparing use of opium and other pain killers which might risk bringing on a premature death. Osler believed that the physician existed to ease all the pain in the final days, in order that patients might fully enjoy their time with their family. At some point, Osler believed, physicians must bow to the inevitable and must cease to interfere in what is a natural process. The dying patient's mental health and comfort must be nurtured, even at the expense of their already deteriorating body.

## References

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2. Harvey Cushing. *The Life of Sir William Osler*. London: Oxford U.P., 1925, p. 669; Steven L. Berk, "Sir William Osler, Ageism, and the 'Fixed Period'." *JAGS*, March 1989, 37 (3): 264.
3. Letter to Mr. Phipps, cited in Harvey Cushing. *The Life of Sir William Osler*, p. 672.
4. Harvey Cushing. *The Life of Sir William Osler*, p. 669.
5. D.B. Hogan. "Osler's 'The Fixed Period'"; *JAGS*, 37 (9): 917.
6. Berk. "Osler's 'The Fixed Period'"; 265, citing Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, pt. 1, sect. 42.
7. Berk. "Osler's 'The Fixed Period'"; 264.
8. Based upon a definition of active (or positive) euthanasia found in Ruth Benedict's *Freedom to Die*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1977, p. 19.
9. William Osler. *Science and Immortality*. London: Archibald & Co. Ltd., 1906.
10. This description of death, written by Shelley, is quoted by Osler in "Sir Wm. Osler and Maeterlinck".
11. Letter from Sir Henry Morris to the Times, Feb. 27th, 1914. Dated in Osler's hand writing.
12. "The Pains of Death", letter from J. Cook Wilson to the Times, dated Feb. 21, 1914 in Osler's hand writing.
13. Harvey Cushing. *The Life of Sir William Osler*. p. 673.

## DIGITIZING WILLIE?

A long-time friend of the Osler Library, Dr. Nicholas Dewey, recently sent us the following excerpt from the annual report of the Royal Society of Medicine for 1992-1993:

"Work is now well advanced on the installation of an integrated computer system in the RSM Library... In honour of a former member of the RSM's Library Committee and the first President of the Section of the History of Medicine, the Society's Library system is being called OSLER -- 'Online System for Library Enquiries at the RSM'."

Apparently readers with a home or office PC and modem will soon be able to dial up OSLER over the telephone lines! One can already dial up MUSE, the McGill University Libraries' on-line catalogue, and search the Osler Library's holdings, which now include the 22,000 Paris medical theses catalogued last year with funds raised through a special Friends' campaign. Readers may contact the Library for exact instructions. MUSE can also be accessed through TELNET, so information about the theses, as well as other books in the Library, is now available to researchers throughout North America. Our only regret is that the Library does not have its own database, to which it can give a suitably Oslerian name. Perhaps EGERTON (External General Enquiries Routed To Osler Network)?

## OSLER LIBRARY FELLOWS FOR 1994

The Selection Committee for the Osler Library Fellowships chose as this year's Research Fellow Prof. Catherine Kudlick of the University of California at Davis. As part of her research for a forthcoming book on cholera in Paris, 1830-1850, Prof. Kudlick spent a month with us this spring consulting our collection of Paris medical theses. The Student Fellow was Terrence Joyce, a fourth year medical student from Dartmouth, who spent August in the Library reading about Osler's interest in Shakespeare.

This year's applications covered a wide range of topics and demonstrated a gratifying level of interest in the Library's collections, old and new. The Fellowships also provide enriching contacts for the Library and the McGill Medical community; we are grateful to the Class of Medicine 1936, and to the Dean of Medicine, for continuing to make them possible.

## RECENT ACQUISITIONS OF NOTE

Since the last issue of the Newsletter, the Library has received a number of interesting and valuable books. One of these is an 18th century treatise on midwifery, Jacques Mesnard's *Le guide des accoucheurs, ou le maistre dans l'art d'accoucher les femmes...* (Paris: De Bure l'ainé Le Breton, Durand, 1743). Mesnard was part of a generation of French surgeons, of whom the most eminent was Jean Astruc, who inaugurated formal teaching for midwives at the Faculty of Medicine at Paris. At the same time, the male surgeons themselves began to invade the hitherto largely female domain of midwifery. Though ostensibly composed for "unlettered women", Mesnard's book also, and perhaps primarily, envisions male midwives. Indeed, his list of desirable qualities in the accoucheur uses only the masculine pronoun: "1. Il doit être intelligent, non sujet au vin, et d'un esprit tranquille..." In ousting the women midwives, a key role was played by instruments such as those illustrated here. Few midwives would have owned, or known how to use such instruments; the more important they became in midwifery, the more midwifery became the domain of surgeons. Mesnard's beautifully illustrated treatise was acquired for the Library in Copenhagen with assistance from the Director of Libraries at McGill University, to whom we express our sincere thanks.

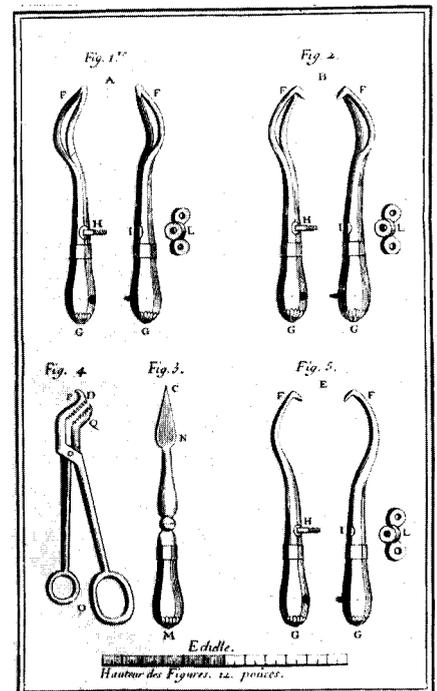
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être de sa mere, ou lorsque cette tête est séparée du corps & qu'elle est restée dans la matrice. A l'égard de tous les autres accouchemens, on les terminera facilement avec la main seule, en suivant tout ce que j'enfeigne, à ce sujet, dans ce Livre; excepté l'accouchement où il se trouve des défauts de conformation dans l'espace que forment les os du bassin de l'hypogastre de la femme; car, en ce cas, il n'est pas possible de sauver la vie à l'enfant, que par l'opération césarienne.

L'instrument avec lequel je peux sauver la vie d'une femme & celle de son enfant, & qui est celui que j'ai fait annoncer dans le Journal de Verdun, du mois d'Avril 1741, est une tenette en double cuillier A, des pièces de laquelle je donne ici la figure, & enfeigne l'usage.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Shigeaki Hinohara, President of the Japan Osler Society, for a copy of his new biography of Osler, a much expanded version of a work first published in 1948. The American Osler Society has also presented us with Persisting Osler II, a second collection of outstanding papers delivered at the Society's annual meetings from 1981 to 1990.

Finally, Johann Jacob Wecker's *Antidotarium speciale* (Basel, 1588), a Renaissance treatise on pharmacology, recently arrived in the Library after some curious peregrinations. Its donor, Mr. Charles J. Mignault, first acquired it a number of years ago in England in lieu of the repayment of a debt! The debt, at least of gratitude, is now happily ours, and we thank Mr Mignault, as well as Miss Kathryn Smith who acted on his behalf, for this welcome gift.



Surgical instruments for obstetrics, illustrated in Jacques Mesnard's *Le Guide des Accoucheurs*.



Sir William Osler.  
Bronze by Emil Seletz, M.D.

### SELETZ BUST OF OSLER PRESENTED TO LIBRARY

In August 1994 the Osler Library received a splendid gift, the original bronze portrait bust of Sir William Osler made over a period of years by the neurosurgeon and sculptor Dr. Emil Seletz, of Los Angeles. Dr. Seletz worked from photographs, and benefited from the advice of two of Osler's students from Johns Hopkins days, and of Seymour Thomas, painter of the well-known portrait of 1908. A copy of this bust was presented by Dr. Seletz to Temple University in 1971, and was illustrated in the Osler Library Newsletter, no. 61, June 1989, in an article by Earl F. Nation, "The busts of Sir William Osler".

The bust now stands in its new home in the Osler Library where it has already been much admired. It enhances the pleasure derived from the contemplation of this fine sculpture to know that it was generously presented by the artist who created it, and by his daughter Dr. Josepha Seletz, (who visited the library in late September to view and photograph the bust in its new setting).

June Schachter  
History of Medicine Librarian

### FRIENDS OF THE OSLER LIBRARY: a Report and an Appeal

The June 1988 Newsletter announced the Library's acquisition of a large collection of French nineteenth century medical theses, and at the beginning of 1993 a special appeal was made to the Friends to assist in the financing of machine-readable brief cataloguing for them. The tape of cataloguing records, produced by scanning the printed catalogue, was finally loaded into McGill's online library catalogue — MUSE — in June 1994. These records, which can be searched by author, title and keyword, are accessible not only to scholars working in the Library, but to anyone who dials up the catalogue through a modem. The New York Academy of Medicine now has McGill's permission to incorporate the records into its own online catalogue and is contributing to our cataloguing costs to the tune of \$3,500 U.S., a mutually beneficial arrangement which will further enhance the accessibility of the collection. It is anticipated that these already much-used theses (worked on most recently by the Library's 1994 Research Fellow who came from California to spend a month here for that purpose) will now become steadily better known, and the Library is grateful to its Friends, whose typically generous response to the special appeal permitted the cataloguing project to go ahead.

If the theses are popular with our readers, so too is that corner of the Library dedicated to the new accessions shelves, the contents of which are a constant reminder both of the generosity of our Friends and of the Library's intention to collect as comprehensively as possible in the history of medicine. At the moment, for instance, the Proceedings of the Third international Symposium on the History of Anesthesia, held in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1992, and Richard Mould's *A Century of Xrays and Radioactivity in Medicine*, 1993, sit side by side with volume 1 of *Chronik der Strahlentherapie, 1900-1960*, and Richard Gordon's *Literary Companion to Medicine: an anthology of prose and poetry*. The copiously illustrated Xray centennial volume is of course a timely arrival; there is to be a major exhibition on the subject at McGill's McCord Museum to which the Osler Library may contribute some historical material. Another anniversary, the Columbus quincentenary, has inspired an explosion of Spanish and Latin American publishing, and the newest addition to the collection from this area is *Medicinas, Drogas y Alimentos vegetales del Nuevo Mundo: textos e imágenes españoles que los introdujeron en Europa* (the theme of New World influences on the European herbalists was taken up in the New World Herbals case in the historic herbals exhibition, *Leaves from the Physick Garden*, described in the February 1994 Newsletter). One of the new books which has not ceased

circulating since it was first put out is *The Fabric of the Body: European traditions of anatomical illustration*, Oxford, 1992; and an extremely popular recent addition to the Reference section is the two volume *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, edited by W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter.

Additions to the historic holdings include an eighteenth century work on practical midwifery: Jacques Mesnard. *Le Guide des Accoucheurs ou le Maistre dans l'art d'accoucher les Femmes*. Paris, 1743 (see article on recent acquisitions in this issue). More prosaically, a gap in holdings of the journal *Transactions of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia* was filled by the acquisition of microfilm reels.

This is a busy time of the year in the Osler Library, and the heavy use made of the collections bears witness to the liberality of its donors and supporters. With this issue of the Newsletter (itself made possible by the continuing support of the Friends) we thank you all for your active and unfailing interest as we launch our 1994-95 appeal for donations.

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