

Reflections on Participating in the Osler Essay Competition

By Mary Koziol

What excited me most about taking on this project was the opportunity to trace the historical roots of phenomena I'm currently experiencing as a medical practitioner in training—with the goal of gaining some applicable insight for my future practice. I spent my first few visits to the Osler Library pawing frantically through books, excitedly learning about medicine's many bizarre and fascinating stories. Sitting in what came to be my favourite little nook in the Osler, the section predominated by books on the history of psychiatry, I recognized I could write an entire Master's or PhD thesis on the topic of gender and psychiatry. With the word limit of 3000, I had to limit my scope enormously in order to try and create a cohesive, well-argued piece of writing.

Fortunately, I was paired with a mentor with an awe-inspiring ability to both think big and help me focus. One of the major things I learned in researching and writing this essay was the need to start small. Pick a time. Pick a place. Learn whatever you can about it. First, try and understand that particular moment in time and the myriad contributing forces—and then you can start to build connections towards a larger picture. I slowly learned to piece together the overwhelming tide of information in a way I found meaningful as a medical trainee. Just as various random facts about different treatment options does not help me decide on the best course of action for my individual patient, various anecdotes splayed across continents and centuries did not help me piece together a larger narrative I could apply to my current practice: I learned to take a systematic approach in sorting through information. In an interesting parallel, my paper discusses the ways the social sciences and humanities can enhance the application of evidence-based medicine to guide more ethical, scientifically sound care. Similarly, I used concepts I had learned in my first year of school about EBM to approach the research for this paper. In particular the 5 A's of Assess, Ask, Acquire, Appraise and Apply were just as applicable in rigorous inquiry into the humanities as it is in the sciences.

As I sought to merge the past with the present in my research paper, I consulted a fairly even split between historical texts and more recent journal articles. Having access simultaneously to McGill's online databases as well as the Osler's wealth of books allowed me to bounce back and forth between many different decades, guided by my carefully crafted research question. I consulted databases and old medical journal archives, remarking the interesting ways medicine has and has not changed.

One very tangible way I improved my research and ultimately critical thinking skills was discovering multiple sources on a single topic; while in the early stages of my essay I was inclined to locate an argument I liked and run with it, my Osler mentor continuously referred me to the abundant literature to help me consider other perspectives. As my mentor emphasized, my job was not to rephrase

the work of others, but rather to consider it alongside many other sources, and draw my own perspectives on it. What did this mean to me as a 21st century medical student? What could I take away from this—what would I want my classmates to know about what I'd learned during these months of frenzied reading? In the end, I believe I have gained skills and knowledge that will have a lifetime's worth of impact. I have learned how to take the very amorphous concept of shifting gender roles within society and develop relevant conclusions for modern day—I learned how to weight different forms of historical evidence, how to assess an author's slant on the subject. Finally, I gained a deeper respect for the profession to which I have devoted my life: I cannot help but be excited to one day make my mark, however small, in the vast and magnificent field of medicine. Above all, I am proud to be standing on the shoulders of giants.