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The Commodification of Humanism:  
Methods, Marketing, and Morals of a Post-Modern Shift in the Philosophy of Medicine

**Reflective Piece**

The Osler library is known to medical students as a place of immense knowledge. To students like myself, who find wonder in libraries, the Osler library appeared too good to be true. Unfortunately, this was in fact the case. With unpredictable circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s Osler Essay experience admittedly strayed from those of previous years. Nonetheless, it would be a lie to say that my experience was not as enriching and enjoyable as I had envisioned years past.

Without access to the Osler library’s physical collection, I turned to online collections and databases. While I prefer sifting through a stack of books, the volume of information accessible online is incomparable. Indeed, I quickly came across an overwhelming number of resources, which subsequently contributed to my difficulty in choosing a topic. Ultimately, it was some of the concerns I held as a student entering medical school⎯with little clinical and medical knowledge⎯that influenced the subject I chose to pursue. With increasing global transparency on existing imperfections in the medical field, and frequent appearances in the media belonging to both positive and negative contexts, I wished to delve further into the recent history of medicine. Despite the superficial glamour of medical school and heroized role of physicians, there have always been areas for improvement. Yet, it is difficult to identify realms that require progress, without an acknowledgement for the history of medicine. Therein lay my motivation to explore an increasingly criticized aspect of the current medical field⎯the commodification of medicine.

With the guidance of Dr. Mary Hague-Yearl, I narrowed my interests to a tangible subject separated into the themes of methods, marketing, and morals, within a particular time period. Thereafter, an extensive use of McGill’s online catalogue permitted my research to extend from the medical reality following the scientific-technological revolution, back to Osler’s time, and even beyond into the Hippocratic era, as a means of illustrating the factors leading up to the context we are now familiar with. Whether it be reading Osler’s original texts in order to gain insight on his humanist perspective, or accessing recent statistics regarding health care spending as a means of grasping the marketing aspect of medicine, a variety of online resources contributed to my understanding of my chosen topic. Having access to such an array of materials spanning a vast period, I could simultaneously broaden my research across multiple areas while also delving into the details of each subsection. In doing so, I discovered the true breadth of the commodification of medicine. Not only does it span hospitals across the globe, in varying degrees of severity, but it also spans across centuries. Despite the more prominent and drastic shift of the 20th century, the moral consequences ensuing a shift in the philosophy of medicine are not new notions. Rather, changes in the patient-physician relationship have been feared and faced by physicians long before the scientific-technological revolution of the mid-20th century. However, the discussion and acknowledgment of the commodification of humanism has only experienced a widespread propagation in recent years. Indeed, insight towards the emergence of commodification within medicine, as well as its corresponding level of public awareness, were only revealed to me by means of this essay.

Sparked by an interest in the humane perspective of medicine, and a long-lasting fascination with humanities, I hope this paper sheds light on the philosophy of medicine and the recent paradigm shift towards the commodification of medicine. With intentions to pursue further endeavours relating to the intersection of humanities and medicine, I am grateful for the opportunity to partake in the Osler Essay Contest. As a medical student with increasing exposition to the clinical milieu, who also holds a profound and newfound perspective, I hope my peers and predecessors take this opportunity to reflect on the current climate of medicine⎯with the aims and means to define the medical field hereafter.