

# A life in medicine: lessons from Shakespeare

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**Michael Radetsky**Department of Pediatrics, Family Practice, Infectious Disease,  
Presbyterian Hospital, University of New Mexico, USA**Correspondence:** Michael Radetsky MD CM, PO Box 14005,  
Albuquerque NM 87101, USA, Tel 001-505-264-0211,  
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## Introduction

Inspiration in medicine often fades with advancing age. Valued teachers disappear. Intense clinical practice fosters isolation. Long hours monopolize our time. The repetitive patterns of illness blunt the sense of discovery and dull the edge of motivation. Professional satisfaction may not compensate for a waning sense of wonder. Often we are in need of inspiration. Sometimes it is not clear where to turn.

Shakespeare has much to say to us about a life in medicine, and he says it in memorable lines. It is not because he wrote either very often or very warmly about doctors:

*Trust not the physician:**His antidotes are poison,**And he slays more than you rob.<sup>1</sup>*

Rather, his vantage point is life itself displayed in a theatrical world of concentrated authenticity. Shakespeare is the chameleon poet who becomes each new human character with a startling fidelity:

*My nature is subdued**To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.<sup>2</sup>*

He fashions a world without prejudice or moral judgments, as if the mere fact of being alive creates a fundamental human equality:

*I see men's judgments are**A parcel of their fortunes; and things outward**Do draw the inward quality after them**To suffer all alike.<sup>3</sup>*

For him good and bad, noble and ignoble are all inseparable:

*The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and**ill together: our virtues would be proud if our**faults whipped them not; and our crimes would**despair if they were not cherished by our own virtues.<sup>4</sup>*

What, then is the advice that Shakespeare has for those of us in search of professional inspiration and refreshment?

Most of us chose medicine because of the twin lures of caring and of curing:

*There are a crew of wretched souls**That stay his cure. Their malady convinces**The great assay of art, but at his touch**Such sanctity hath given his hand,**They presently amend.<sup>5</sup>*

We wanted to engage our restless minds and keen intelligence:

*What is a man,**If his chief good and market of his time**Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.**Sure he that made us with such large discourse,**Looking before and after, gave us not**That capability and god-like reason**To fust in us unused.<sup>6</sup>*

And we wanted to be worthy of a nobility that we knew was rarely given or deserved:

*They that have power to hurt and will do none,**That do not do the thing they most do show,*

*Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,  
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,  
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces.<sup>7</sup>*

We found all of that in medicine. We learned the skills that seemed to alter the fate of people:

*Would ye not think  
that cunning to be great that could restore this cripple  
to his legs again?<sup>8</sup>*

There was high drama to our lives, as we sought to save by whatever means:

*Diseases desperate grown  
By desperate appliance are relieved,  
Or not at all.<sup>9</sup>*

If the truth be known, we felt exalted, special, even noble:

*The kingly crowned head, the vigilant eye,  
The counselor heart, the arm our soldier,  
Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter.<sup>10</sup>*

The years passed. The glorious feelings that animated us began to dissipate:

*Glory is like a circle in the water,  
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself,  
Till by broad spreading it disperse to nought.<sup>11</sup>*

We recognized that our station and skill had been exaggerated:

*Why do you bend such solemn brows on me?  
Think you I bear the shears of destiny?  
Have I commandment on the pulse of life?<sup>12</sup>*

The search for financial security lost its golden luster:

*How quickly nature falls into revolt  
When gold becomes her object.<sup>13</sup>*

We found that advice, as sage as it might have seemed, was less successful than we had supposed:

*But words are words; I never yet did hear  
That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear.<sup>14</sup>*

Too often the technology of life support appeared ghoulish:

*The time has been,  
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end; but now they rise again,  
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools.<sup>15</sup>*

We noticed that our actions had become too rote, too habitual:

*And art, made tongue-tied by authority,  
And folly—doctor-like—controlling skill,  
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,  
And captive good attending captain ill.<sup>16</sup>*

And with a shudder we realized that our organ of human empathy had begun to atrophy:

*A wretched soul, bruised with adversity,  
We bid be quiet, when we hear it cry;  
But were we burdened with like weight of pain,  
As much or more we should ourselves complain.<sup>17</sup>*

Yet, given time for reflection, we find that we have learned other things previously unforeseen, as if in compensation. We know now that the body normally has a momentum for healing that requires only time and patience:

*How poor are they that have not patience!  
What wound did ever heal but by degrees.  
Thou knowest we work by wit and not by witchcraft,  
And wit depends on dilatory time.<sup>18</sup>*

Often cures are elusive, or illusory:

*He hath abandoned his physicians, madam; under whose practices he hath persecuted time with hope, and finds no other advantage in the process but only the losing of hope by time.<sup>19</sup>*

Trained to intervene, we find that it may be more important to know when not to act:

*I say, we must not  
So stain our judgment, or corrupt our hope  
To prostitute our past-cure malady  
To empirics, or to disserve so  
Our great self and our credit to esteem  
A senseless help, when help past sense we deem.<sup>20</sup>*

It is the caring rather than the curing that often matters most:

*The quality of mercy is not strained,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.<sup>21</sup>*

We have learned that life, even our own, is evanescent:

*We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.<sup>22</sup>*

So that time becomes our most precious possession:

*I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;  
For now hath time made me his numbering clock?  
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar  
Their watches on unto mine eyes, the outward watch,  
Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,  
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.<sup>23</sup>*

Yet, none of this knowledge would be ours were it not for what we do every day:

*Give me leave  
To speak my mind, and I will through and through—*

*Cleanse the foul body of the infected world,  
If they will patiently receive my medicine.<sup>24</sup>*

Along with our medicines, we are invited into a sudden intimacy with perfect strangers at the very moment when they are reminded of their own frailty—for every illness is a little death:

*How does your patient, doctor?  
Not so sick, my lord,  
As she is troubled with thick coming fancies,  
That keep her from her rest.<sup>25</sup>*

Dark fancies and the fear of death are real. We have seen it. We may have felt it ourselves:

*Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot. . . .  
The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
Can lay on nature is a paradise  
To what we fear of death.<sup>26</sup>*

Still, the grip of fear in us has been loosened because it is so regular a part of our daily practice. We have seen too much to be unaware that, as surely as we encounter the cries of new life, death too is inevitable.

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end.<sup>27</sup>*

This daily proximity to illness and dying leaves us with no illusions. Our time too will come:

*By medicine life may be prolonged,  
Yet death will seize the doctor too.<sup>28</sup>*

In all of this, the years have confirmed what we might have vaguely suspected at the beginning of our careers. What we didn't suspect, though, was the surprising experience of intimacy—not with colleagues but with patients. Every day we are invited into the secret lives of others. We are strangers. And yet we share in moments of private revelation. We see the dawn and dusk of life. We behold lives fully realized and lives barely begun. At times of intense human clarity, we are asked to participate.

Like a family member, we rejoice in the return of life and health.

*O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful! And again wonderful, and after that, out of all whooping.*<sup>29</sup>

Like a family member, we share in the sadness of illness and loss.

*Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there*

*Weep our sad bosoms empty.*<sup>30</sup>

Like a family member, we yield to the honesty of the moment.

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;*

*Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*<sup>31</sup>

No one else has this regular opportunity. No one else has this intimate exposure to the truths of being human. If ever wisdom flows from experience, then we should be the ones best able to arrive at a place of peace for ourselves. We of all people should realize that the delight of living is amplified by the inevitability of passing away:

*There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.*

*If it be now, 'tis not to come.*

*If it be not to come, it will be now.*

*If it be not now yet it will come—*

*The readiness is all.*

*Since no man has aught of what he leaves,*

*What is't to leave betimes.*

*Let be.*<sup>32</sup>

“Let be.” This affirmation imbues our own ordinary lives with heightened contentment. We realize that it is enough merely to live. With eyes as sober as in the aged but as fresh as in childhood, we can see the world as Shakespeare sees it: neither good nor bad, but all Good:

*Sweet are the uses of adversity,*

*Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,*

*Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;*

*And this our life exempt from public haunt,*

*Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,*

*Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.*

*I would not change it.*<sup>33</sup>

In the beginning, we struggled to achieve our competence. Now we struggle to integrate our experiences. In these concentrated lines, Shakespeare shows us that we need not look far afield for help. Instead, we find that our profession, and our patients, have given us the means already. Once recognized, these sudden intimacies enlighten us and grant us those revitalizing insights that should come from a life lived in medicine.

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## Conflicts of interest

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