

Hippocrates in Queen Street

James Robertson¹

History & Humanities

This poem was presented to Professor Derek Bell (President RCPE, 2014–2020) on the occasion of his Triennial dinner on 21 February 2020.

Correspondence to:

J Robertson
Sidlaw House
24 South Street
Newtyle
Angus
PH12 8UQ

Email:

james@kettillonia.co.uk

Our time is short, I will not keep you long.
This is distinguished company and, though less
elevated than that of Asklepios and his daughters –
Hygeia, Panacea and the rest, with whom
I have been long acquainted – I find yours preferable.
They are great deities of course, but I confess
all gods fill me with unease, even these
the patrons of our honourable profession.
They cannot help it but they make bad doctors.
They are readily offended; being superhuman
they are not humane; and being immortal they consider death
mere inconvenience, and pain and suffering
things to be dispensed, not eased or ended.

Two thousand years ago and more, from Kos,
my island home, I took a different view:
that illness among human beings was natural,
not handed out as punishment. If I was right,
then it was also natural to want to overcome it:
to find new remedies for old complaints,
mend the wounded soldier or the broken athlete,
fortify the weak, reduce the pains of age or injury,
save the mother and the child – and save, as well,
the knowledge gained, for future generations.
And, down the years, across the continents,
this is what occurred: the knowledge was preserved and shared.
Thus came about great institutions like this college,
with its library of sixty thousand books.
Thus the dead speak, as I do now to you.

In this, the so-called Athens of the North,
the knowledge flourished and was built upon.
My sea view here is of the Firth of Forth,
a chillier prospect than the blue Aegean;
the *loony dook* does not appeal to me; the weather
could be better – often it could not be worse –

¹ Novelist and poet, Newtyle, Scotland

and still from time to time I mistake a look of cold contempt for one of kindness, or vice versa. Yet, not all is alien. There is a kind of Doric spoken here I've grown accustomed to: a homely tongue that once was used by kings and commoners alike, but nowadays has worn quite thin, at least among the New Town folk. *Ach weel, that's jist Athenians for ye, north or sooth: They pit on airs and graces but their claes are fou o holes.* So I have heard it said, although it was the opinion of a man from Fife.

How could I not, however, feel at home in this great temple where at every turn I recognise familiar beings? There is the centaur Chiron, there the snake of healing, there the cockerel of light. These natural and mythic symbols matter, especially in an age when doctors can perform such wondrous acts as make folk half-believe in miracles. It can be a fine line between facts and the fantastic, and we should never be ashamed to marvel at what medicine can do, nor to acknowledge the capacity all creatures have within themselves to fight disease, recover and survive. But miracles? No. Doctors now achieve things even gods could not have dreamt of, but doctors have not morphed into magicians. What's different is precisely what the centaur, snake and cockerel represent: the heritage, the piled-up centuries of understanding and experience.

Yet, I must also speak of what's been wasted through vanity or neglect. There have always been physicians who demonstrate indifference both to the patients who should be their prime concern and to the oath they swore which bears my name. Furthermore, it's true that some, otherwise clear-headed, confuse knowledge with wisdom and conclude that the more we know the wiser we shall be. With the dubious advantage of my longevity I assure you this is not the case. If you think me wrong, then I refer you to another myth, concocted by a son of this divided city: within the good intent of every Dr Jekyll may lurk the fatal virus of a Mr Hyde.

Still, having always been an optimist, I do maintain that medicine reveals the best of our intelligence. Ironic, then, that great advances in it sometimes come from war, of all stupidities of men the stupidest. I do mean *men* in that regard, but all of you – regardless of your sex, or race, or creed, or lack of one – have prejudices, fears and rivalries (which, mercifully, seldom lead to war). Good! You are human beings! As doctors, some of you are pioneers, some tread more cautiously, consolidate and add to others' work. Again, all good! Experiment, research, facilitate, improve, instruct, build evidence on which to base a better kind of care – all this you do, some with far less money and support than others, but you do it. Perhaps you too cannot be cured of optimism.

But what's the one commodity that has no substitute, that one day drags its heels, another sprints, is simultaneously chronic and acute and that no one, not even an old ghost like me, can get enough of?

I mean that two-faced demon, Time: Time the great healer,
Time the torturer too, Time who both chokes and knits,
rots and repairs, is slow or sudden, merciful or cruel,
but who never stops subtracting from our days and years;
Time the unrepentant, all-consuming thief. He ate me up
and each of you he will in turn select and take,
deprived at last of every last defence you thought you had,
whether of faith or science, philosophy or art –
to all of which medicine owes some debt.

So, there's a choice: resign yourselves to fate –
an even worse physician than the gods –
or take this mortal state into your own hands
and make the best of it. That, I hold, is what the best of doctors do:
recognise each patient as a whole and complex being,
a rich, imperfect mix of mind and body
and – for want of a less contentious term –
of soul, and build their care on this reality.
Your patient is your mirror: therefore, look with sympathy;
work with the faults and flaws, see the stories in the scars,
replace what worn-out parts can be replaced and,
when remedy cannot be found, in the last resort be kind.
The world needs all the kindness it can get.
Our time is short. The snake casts off its skin;
the cockerel calls up the morning light;
we glimpse the centaur leaping in the wood;
we work, we live, we love; we say good night.

But not just yet. Although *I* will now disappear,
life is what *you* are for, and why you are here.

