I’m sitting here in the home of Sir William Osler, 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford, England. It’s Friday, Nov. 7, 2014, and I’ve been invited here by Sir David Watson, principal of Green Templeton College, Oxford University’s medical school. Principal is akin to dean in the U.S. My primary mission for the previous evening was to deliver Oxford’s annual McGovern Lecture on the topic of John P. McGovern and his biography I published the past year.

This morning is a bonus opportunity to lead a faculty seminar in Sir William Osler’s home, now named the Osler McGovern Centre, where Osler lived from 1905 to 1919 as Oxford’s Regis Professor of Medicine. But who was Sir William Osler? Why is he important? And what was his connection to The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth)?

**Knowing Osler**

Osler (1849-1919) is considered one of the great physicians of modern times and his 1893 textbook, Principles and Practice of Medicine, cemented his already sterling reputation as the best and brightest clinician of his day. His medical career began as a young faculty member at McGill University School of Medicine in Montreal where he received his medical degree in 1872. At McGill he quickly became a favorite professor among the students for his joy of teaching, quick wit and sense of equanimity. He bought microscopes out of his own pocket to share his love of observation and discovery, and modeled the best
traits of patient care and professionalism. When the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia recruited him in 1884, Osler’s students and fellow faculty followed him to the train station hoping somehow he would change his mind.

His career only accelerated in Philadelphia as he excelled as professor of clinical medicine. His legend grew as he led his students into the wards for bedside instruction – novel at the time – and followed that up with regular hands-on teaching sessions in the Blockley dead house. Conducting more than 1,000 autopsies, Osler developed an understanding of the natural history of disease that few in medicine could match. He was fearless of disease and tireless for discovery.

In Baltimore, a new medical school was planned to accompany Johns Hopkins Hospital that had launched in 1889. Four years later the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine would open doors and become the gold standard for medical schools in this country and Osler was recruited to join William Welch, William Halsted, and Howard Kelly to form the dream team of chairman to redefine medical education in this country. They would create a new standard for all medical schools with rigorous admissions requirements open to men and women alike backed by a top-notch, four-year curriculum integrating research with clinical studies at every opportunity.

Abraham Flexner would use that new Hopkins standard to evaluate all other medical schools and his famous 1910 Flexner Report would change the face of American medical education in many important and lasting ways.

As chief of medicine at Hopkins, Olser taught his students at the bedside and reminded them continuously that they were treating a person, not simply a disease. He insisted that medicine is not a business but a calling that equally exercises one’s heart and mind. His textbook would be reprinted some 16 editions and was the textbook of medicine until Harrison’s Principles of Internal Medicine came along in 1950. Osler’s textbook outlined in pure and simple terms how much we had come to know about many diseases, yet how few treatment options actually existed at the time. The Rockefeller Institute was created in direct response to Osler’s book and the influence and reputation of Osler continued to grow on an international scale.

In 1905, Oxford University came calling, and Osler left Baltimore and Johns Hopkins to become the Regis Professor of Medicine at Oxford. When Osler spoke, people listened. In his day, he was much sought after as the voice of professional medicine. His many lectures became classics and were reprinted and bound into small books that were passed along to generation after generation of health professionals. He exemplified the many attributes of medical professionalism important to this day.

**Inside the “Open Arms”**

So here I am sitting in Osler’s Oxford home where Sir William held
An Oslerian minute - UTHealth

13 Norham Gardens

Norham Gardens, Oxford

Revere’s childhood drawings in the attic of 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford

Norham Gardens, Oxford

Deep in Osler’s soul was an understanding that medicine is an art and a science. In his words, “Twin berries on one stem, grievous damage has been done to both in regarding the Humanities and Science in any other light than complemental.” He was saying the obvious that to care for a patient is different from simply treating a patient. It requires the pairing of scientific knowledge and expertise with a focus on the patient that calls for a special human capacity to listen and act with compassion — a blending of the heart, mind and hand.

Right there on the wall to my left is a photo of Sir William with Walt Whitman who frequented these premises as the guest of Osler and his wife, Grace Revere Osler, the great-granddaughter of Paul Revere. Their only son, fittingly named Revere, would grow up in this house. His childhood drawings on the walls of the fourth floor attic can still be seen if you move a few boxes and bring a flashlight. I inspected them all with sad remembrance that Revere tragically died on a World War I battlefield in Belgium where he rests to this day. Sir William’s wife, Lady Osler, reported her husband was never the same after losing Revere and would weep muffled tears of grief late into the night for his only son before succumbing on Dec. 29, 1919, to the great influenza pandemic of the time.

The UTHealth connection

So what’s the UTHealth connection to Sir William Osler? Today Osler’s home is being restored by Green Templeton College as the Osler McGovern Centre. That’s the same John P. McGovern (1921-2007) who has such a strong presence here on our campus. McGovern, born in 1921, and Osler who died in 1919, obviously did not know each other. But Osler and John P. McGovern’s mentor, Wilburt Davison, knew each other well. It was back in 1913 when Davison, a young Princeton student, came to train with Osler as a Rhodes Scholar. Interesting to note is that an Oxford alum, Cecil J. Rhodes, created the scholarship in his name to bring the best minds from around the globe to Oxford for an international exchange of scholarship. The first Rhodes Scholarship was awarded in 1904, two years after Rhodes’s death.

Davison not only trained with Olser but, right here at 13 Norham Gardens in this room where I’m sitting, he came for tea and to share stories and the
history of medicine. Davison would complete his studies at Oxford, return to complete his medical degree at Johns Hopkins and then be handed a very special opportunity: At 35, he was asked in 1927 to become the founding dean of Duke University Medical School and build a new medical school from ground up in Durham, N.C.

Duke Medical School opened in Oct. of 1930. Nine years later, a young John P. McGovern arrived on campus as an undergraduate with eyes set on acceptance to Davison’s new medical school. You get the idea: McGovern learned about Osler through Davison, and forever followed the values Osler had modeled so many years ago. In 1970, McGovern even founded the American Osler Society to assure the attributes of professionalism and importance of the medical humanities is not lost over time.

Especially important to McGovern was Osler’s understanding that the art and the science of medicine must never be separated. Two McGovern-supported humanities programs are today considered models for others to follow, the John P. McGovern Academy of Oslerian Medicine at our sister campus at The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and our own UTHealth McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics, now celebrating 10 years as of this writing.

As I tell the stories of Osler, the Oxford faculty keeps bringing me back to these humanities programs. They want to know all about our medical humanities program at UTHealth — several taking careful notes and pointing out the need for such medical humanities programs in England as well. I can only feel proud to have this opportunity to share something of value with esteemed Oxford faculty, students and visiting scholars on behalf of UTHealth right here in Osler’s home.

Here in the Osler McGovern Centre where Sir William Osler once held court, there are now opportunities for faculties around the world to come together and share insights on medical education, professionalism and history – topics Sir William championed. If he were here today, he’d have plenty to say about each. Telling his stories in this room in his house is an emotional experience – I can feel his spirit.

From Osler to Davison to McGovern is not a long jump. McGovern, who held a faculty appointment at each of our...
UTHealth schools was a tireless proponent of all Osler stood for. He even helped Green Templeton College to restore Osler’s home as a conferencing center in 2000. We can all be proud that UTHealth and Oxford University share some common bonds through one of the greatest names in medicine — Sir William Osler.

‘Bout Time is about connecting our past to our present. Dr. Bryant Boutwell is the John P. McGovern Professor of Oslerian Medicine at the McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics and a Distinguished Teaching Professor. He is the author of two books on the history of Houston and the Texas Medical Center and writes this column to share the stories of our past—stories that define who we are and how we got here.

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