All Michael Bliss intended to do was write about a prominent Canadian physician. Yet, without a single link to Johns Hopkins, the award-winning author has become an unofficial Hopkins historian whose biography of William Osler is often compared to Harvey Cushing’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Life of Sir William Osler*.

“He was this towering figure in his profession,” says Bliss, a University of Toronto history professor. “And I was interested in him because he was Canadian.” While Cushing’s book remains the preeminent Osler biography, its thickness and dated language also make for an intimidating read. But Bliss’s books on Osler and his protégé Cushing have been lauded for their readability, making them so popular with Hopkins physicians that Department of Medicine Chairman Mike Weisfeldt invited Bliss to this year’s School of Medicine biennial reunion, where, during a special dinner, he’ll talk about chronicling the two men’s lives.

“Bliss’s biography of William Osler is a worthy successor to Cushing’s,” says pulmonologist and Osler residency director Charles Wiener. “He not only tells Osler’s story in an approachable fashion but also captures and communicates Osler’s human qualities, which continue to make him an inspiration for physicians everywhere.”

When he started his Osler book in 1993, Bliss knew little about Johns Hopkins. But his research eventually brought him to Baltimore, where he received a crash course in Hopkins history from Osler enthusiasts like geneticist Victor McKusick and the staff at the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives. “I wandered into learning about Johns Hopkins simply because Osler had been there,” Bliss says.


(Continued on page 2)
Being a Mentor Is Time Well Spent

In his celebrated biography of William Osler, Harvey Cushing describes a group of house officers known as the latch-keyers who were “more intimate than others,” both with each other and with Osler himself. Like Cushing, each had a key to the first chief of medicine’s home and enjoyed unique access to his private life and family.

Such intimacy offered the latch-keyers a glimpse into what else a medical career could offer, particularly to physicians whose drive and passion resembled Osler’s own. It’s an experience shared by many of us who were fortunate enough to train in an era when attending-resident relationships still flourished outside the hospital. Some of our fondest memories include dinners and parties at faculty members’ homes. Sitting in their living rooms, we could envision our own futures, complete with loving families, comfortable houses and bookshelves made of something other than cinder blocks and plywood.

Today, though, I fear this important component of housestaff training is suffering a death by a thousand cuts.

At the root of this loss, I suspect, are the same factors affecting many other aspects of our lives: increasing strains on limited time. As clinical care becomes more fragmented, so do the interactions between housestaff and faculty. With increasing patient demands and work-hour restrictions, teaching rounds are often poorly attended or interrupted by housestaff answering pages. As a result, I often hear faculty saying, “I can’t find the house officer caring for my patient,” or housestaff saying, “I’ve never seen that attending.”

Yet housestaff need close relationships with attending physicians now more than ever.

Today’s residents make career-shaping decisions early in their junior year, against a backdrop of widespread financial insecurity. Many, shouldering educational debts of $100,000 or more, shy away from academic medicine to pursue more lucrative practice options. Our housestaff desperately need off-the-job interactions with faculty who’ve experienced academic success so they can see the potential of such a career.

I have no magic solutions to offer. We may never fully regain the closeness that Osler’s latch-keyers knew. Still, we must make an Osler-like effort to open our lives to housestaff, whether by inviting them over for a social event, to watch the big game or just to have a home-cooked meal. Yes, it means a few more hours of free time gone. But we cannot underestimate housestaff’s need for personal attention and positive reinforcement from faculty who are willing to be role models for future colleagues.

Charles Wiener, Director
Osler Medical Training Program

“A Worthy Successor”
(from page 1)

Bliss expects Hopkins to play a pivotal role in his next project, a book about the rise of medicine in North America. “Johns Hopkins was crucial in the transfer of medicine from Europe to America,” he explains. “The institution was created with a mandate to be the best in the world, and thanks to people like Osler, it became that.”

‘A Worthy Successor’
Beyond the Dome

**Thomas Duffy:** On Osler, Cushing, and what can be learned from them.

In his paper, “The Osler-Cushing Covenant,” housestaff alum and Hopkins graduate Thomas Duffy offers unusual insight into the relationship between William Osler and Harvey Cushing. Published in *Perspectives in Biological Medicine* in 2005, the paper so hit home with members of the Osler housestaff program that the Department of Medicine invited Duffy to speak during this year’s Osler Housestaff Reunion.

**Aequanimitas:** What prompted you to write about Osler and Cushing?

**Duffy:** I found it fascinating that Osler reached out to Cushing, a man 20 years his junior. I knew that such a relationship must be unique in medicine. That friendship consumed them and culminated with Harvey Cushing writing what was essentially a panegyric to Osler. In fact, I don’t know of a relationship since that has resulted in a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography written about the mentor by his protégé. And I certainly don’t know of any that are as prominent as this one, between two of the most renowned men in medicine.

**Aequanimitas:** Why do you think their relationship was so successful?

**Duffy:** Cushing had a background, set of interests and sophistication that were dramatically similar to Osler’s own. Their association is a perfect example of how mentors frequently choose individuals who mirror themselves. As a result, it’s not just the protégé who benefits. Osler also found something of a kindred spirit.

**Aequanimitas:** Do these kinds of relationships still exist between residents and attendings?

**Duffy:** I think they’re becoming less and less common, largely because of the need for most teachers to fulfill their duties not just as teachers, but also in the very busy practice of medicine.

**Aequanimitas:** What can be done to regain those bonds?

**Duffy:** I’ve often compared mentoring to midwifery. Just as a midwife assists a mother in giving birth to a child, a medical mentor is there helping young physicians develop success in the youngest stages of their careers. An important component of mentoring involves making an investment in residents’ personal lives, so that attending physicians are more than just an intellectual presence. They should guide residents through all of the different dimensions of life, just as Osler did with Cushing.
## On the Wards

### Update on Osler Residents

**Martin Britos-Bray, Assistant Chief of Service**

One of the most valuable experiences of my medical education occurred last summer, not at a patient's bedside or in a laboratory, but while I was sitting in a neurosurgery waiting room waiting to hear if my wife would be OK.

She had started complaining of headaches months beforehand. Her personality changed from the sparkling, energetic and enthusiastic woman I had married to someone apathetic, listless and constantly tired. I begged her to let me take her to the hospital, but she always refused.

Then, on a Sunday night in July 2006, her condition reached a boiling point. When I returned home from a long shift, she said she hadn't eaten all day and couldn't keep food down. She was disoriented and in a lot of pain. Finally, around 10 p.m., she let me take her to the emergency room, where she underwent a series of tests, including chest X-rays, a CT scan and a lumbar puncture. All the while, I played a physician's role—checking her test results, asking questions, talking to the radiologists.

Then her physician approached me. My wife, he said, had a gigantic mass in her brain. And my first reaction was the same as what so many of our patients and their loved ones experience after receiving such news: I panicked.

By then it was 1 a.m., and our friends and family were beginning to arrive in the neurology ICU waiting room. By 6 a.m., Linda was getting ready for an MRI, and surgeon Jon Weingart had signed on to perform the 10-hour surgery. By the next day, he had removed the mass, a common intracranial tumor. Two days later, my wife was herself again, and all of the chaos that had fallen down around us was over.

It's difficult to comprehend how, in less than a week, life can be turned upside down and then repaired. It's difficult to comprehend how bravely our patients face life's most terrifying unknowns. Now, I can truly understand the desolation and fear that comes with learning that a loved one might die. After all, I've felt it firsthand.

---

### The Osler Fund

**The Gift of Opportunity**

Investments in the future of our housestaff are priceless. Unless we can give them chances to grow and develop academically, we'll never know what housestaff members can achieve professionally.

Many of the opportunities they do enjoy are the direct result of your generosity. In fact, since October 2006, former housestaff have given almost $17,000 to the Osler Fund for Scholarship. Those donations help provide a multifaceted education by supporting travel to scientific meetings in the United States and numerous research projects.

Clearly your gifts are making a difference. Please continue to invest in the future of our housestaff.

If you did not receive our most recent Osler Fund for Scholarship mailing, or would like more information on how you can make a donation, please contact Charles Turner in the Department of Medicine, 410-516-4052 or cturner5@jhmi.edu.

---

## Aequanimitas

The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine
Department of Medicine
600 North Wolfe Street
Baltimore, MD 21287-1720

Edward D. Miller, M.D., dean/CEO
Myron Weisfeldt, M.D., chairman, Department of Medicine
Charles Wiener, M.D., director, Osler Medical Training Program
Patrick Gilbert, director of editorial services
Mary Ellen Miller, managing editor
Lauren Manfuso, senior writer
Abby Ferretti, designer

*Aequanimitas* is published twice a year by Johns Hopkins Medicine Marketing and Communications, Dalal Haldeman, vice president.

© The Johns Hopkins University, 2007

---

Save the date for the 2007 Osler Housestaff Reunion. See inside for details.