



# “Oh I Suppose I Should”: A Poem on the Pressures of Perfectionism in Medicine?



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## Le Médecin Malgré Lui

by William Carlos Williams

Oh I suppose I should  
Wash the walls of my office,  
Polish the rust from  
My instruments and keep them  
Definitely in order;  
Build shelves in  
The little laboratory;  
Empty out the old stains,  
Clean the bottles  
And refill them; buy  
Another lens; put  
My journals on edge instead of  
Letting them lie flat  
In heaps—then begin  
Ten years back and  
Gradually  
Read them to date,  
Cataloguing important  
Articles for ready reference.  
I suppose I should  
Read the new books.  
If to this I added  
A bill at the tailor’s  
And the cleaner’s  
And grew a decent beard  
And cultivated a look  
Of importance—  
Who can tell? I might be  
A credit to my Lady Happiness  
And never think anything  
But a white thought!

Imposter syndrome is pervasive among medical trainees and is likely underreported.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon, in which

people have feelings of inadequacy and an irrational fear of being not as capable as colleagues or superiors, was first described in 1978 by psychologists Clance and Imes, but was artfully captured by William Carlos Williams, a physician-writer, 60 years earlier in his poem *Le médecin malgré lui*.<sup>2</sup> Discussing this poem with trainees allows them to reflect not only on the responsibilities of a physician but on themes of performance, self-care, and pressures of perfectionism. In reading this text, medical trainees can begin to ask themselves questions like “What kind of person do I need to be a good physician? Is it enough to be myself?”

In medical education, the use of a “third thing,” in the words of educator Parker Palmer, is thought to help students in reflective groups engage in conversation around sensitive and personal topics they may otherwise feel less comfortable talking about.<sup>3</sup> The perspective offered by the poem, piece of music, or work of art—the third thing—represents “neither the voice of the facilitator nor the voice of a participant.” This buffer allows students who read the piece together to share their interpretations at whatever speed and depth they feel comfortable in, “giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs.”<sup>3</sup> In-depth analysis of a poem like *Le médecin malgré lui* allows medical trainees to reflect on their experiences and explore themes that may arise in their clinical educations, without making direct references to themselves, approaching the topic “on a slant.”

From the beginning of *Le médecin malgré lui*, there is a tension between what the narrator of the poem perceives themselves to be and what he thinks is wanted from a doctor, and this tension is prominently displayed throughout the poem. The title itself comes from a French comedic satire by Moliere,<sup>4</sup> which features a character who pretends to be a doctor to escape death but finds that it is surprisingly easy to pretend to be a doctor, and decides to give up woodcutting, his original profession, to become a “doctor”. The title means “the doctor in spite of himself.” Thus, the title already hints at the theme of performance and appearance—what does it mean to be a doctor in spite of himself?

“I suppose I should” is a phrase that appears only twice in the poem, though it is understood that it can be attached to all of the actions that are contemplated. The narrator notes that he “should” “wash the wall of [the] office” or “empty out the old stains” and that perhaps these actions would help him appear to be a doctor; however, the sheer number and

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magnitude of tasks, such as reading 10 years’ worth of medical journals, suggests that the author, in reality, will not be able to perform these tasks. The narrator understands that his actions are performative and acknowledges the tension between who he is and who he could be. The narrator’s impossible “should-do list” encourages students to reflect on their own unrealistic expectations of themselves. The honesty and vulnerability that Williams exhibits in *Médecin* gives trainees permission to acknowledge their own uncertain, uncomfortable, and even negative thoughts and feelings. Such permission is counter to so much of medical training which requires—from the earliest stages of premedical studies—perfect scores, grades, attitudes, and intentions. Using “I suppose I should” as a writing prompt or asking trainees to reflect on which “should” they relate to in the poem can open up important conversations about imposter syndrome, burn-out, and the challenges of professional identity formation.

One of the narrator’s concerns is how he can become a more knowledgeable doctor. The narrator explains that he could “begin ten years back and gradually read [the journals] to date cataloguing important articles for ready reference” and also read the “new books.” Medicine is often touted as a field in which one is forever learning—there is a constant influx of new discoveries and innovations and this makes it difficult to keep up with literature. While reading this poem, medical students may ask themselves: when will I know enough? While there is no answer to this question, this reflection process itself will help students continue on their path to a life of learning, humility, and constant recalibration.<sup>5</sup> They may also feel reassured that Williams, who practiced medicine a century ago, shared their fears about not knowing enough.

The last line of the poem can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. At the end of this litany about what one should do to be a doctor, the narrator states, likely tongue in cheek, that if only he did all these things he would be perfectly happy—except he knows he can’t. Medical trainees may reflect on the tension between what the narrator thinks would make for a perfect physician versus what is realistic.

Ultimately, Williams’ poem encourages us to question what it means to be a physician – how do we balance the multitude of tasks that one could do as a physician with our personal well-being? What makes for a good physician?

Learning objectives for using this poem in a poetry workshop with medical students or trainees:

1. Read the poem and circle or underline a few words or phrases that jump out at you. Write your comments and ideas in the margins of the poem and discuss with the person next to you or in the group.

2. Use the phrase from the opening line of the poem, “Oh I suppose I should,” as a writing prompt. Write for 5–10 min (or longer) and then return to the group to share, if you wish.

#### Discussion Questions:

- How might societal expectations surrounding what a physician ‘should’ do influence one’s perception of self?
- How might self-image impact the care that you provide to patients?
- What does it mean for a physician to only have “white thoughts”? Is that possible? If not, why not?

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no competing interests.

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