Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress

Our subject has been described both as one of the world’s five greatest dramatists and as one of the world’s five greatest short story writers [1]. In his short life, he produced brilliant plays and stories, yet he spent most of his adult years as a practising physician.

Born in 1860 in the Soviet Union, he was initially educated at a school for Greek boys [2] but the family descended into poverty when his father was declared bankrupt in 1876. He paid for his own education through a succession of jobs including private tutoring, catching birds and selling short stories. In 1884, he qualified in medicine from Moscow University and worked in hospitals. He really wanted to become a lecturer at the medical school and so undertook a medico-social study of a penal colony to gain his doctorate. Over a 3-month period, he interviewed 6000 people reporting on their social conditions. What he found appalled him. The inhabitants lived in conditions of poor sanitation and very low standards of public health. There were epidemics of diphtheria and typhoid and cases of pneumonia, marasmus and gastrointestinal disorders. He recognized that the poor social conditions produced ill-health and stated publicly that the role of the physician was not to treat patients but to eliminate the adverse social conditions that reduced resistance to disease. He concluded that charity and subscription were not the answer but that government had a duty to finance human treatment for the less fortunate convicts.

The university ultimately rejected his thesis and our subject gave up academic medicine although he published his thesis privately [3]. In 1892, he bought a small country estate, built three schools and donated his medical services for the good of the peasants despite experiencing his own ill-health. His work as a doctor both enriched his writing but left him little time to write as much as he wished.

In the beginning, his literary output was not very successful. In 1896, he renounced the theatre after the disastrous reception of one of his most famous plays only for it to receive acclaim just 2 years later, despite challenging both the actors and the audience. At first, he wrote stories for the money but he became more artistic and innovative, insisting that the role of an artist was to ask questions and not to answer them [4].

In March 1897, he suffered a haemorrhage of the lungs from tuberculosis, undoubtedly contracted from the penal colony. He moved to Yalta and continued to write but by May 1904 he was terminally ill. His death was as dramatic as some of his plays—he sat up, his doctor gave him an injection of camphor, he drank a glass of champagne, then lay on his left side and quietly, like a child sleeping, he passed away. Anton Chekhov did nothing, except with style.

N. Williams

References