Physician-poets

Sir—Do doctors have an exceptional interest or talent for poetry (Jan 25, p 275), or is it instead merely inevitable that by chance alone some good poets will also be physicians? Perhaps, even, there is some antipathy between the callings, so that the physician-poet is a peculiarly rare beast? Hard statistical information there may not be but an interesting resource is Thomas Kirkpatrick Monro’s *The physician: as man of letters science and action,* first published in 1933 with a second edition in 1951. The work provides classified biographies of 395 doctors who distinguished themselves in non-medical fields, excluding 20 from America, 106 from Europe and elsewhere, and 17 “students of medicine who never qualified” who are not classified. Ignoring the 105 doctors also distinguished as scientists, since that almost seems part of the job description, and with the use of Monro’s own somewhat eccentric classifications, the table shows the various categories in descending order of frequency.

That poetry is at the top of the list perhaps gives some support to the idea that medicine and poetry have a special affinity, although this may also, of course, reflect the greater ease of maintaining dual careers in the two than in, say, medicine and piracy or medicine and saintliness; and it may also be that the editors of the *Dictionary of national biography* (Monro’s principal source) are more sympathetic to including, for example, doctors who are also minor poets than doctors who are also minor criminals.

Chris McManus
Academic Department of Psychiatry, Paterson Centre for Mental Health, Imperial College School of Medicine at St Mary’s, London W2 1PD, UK


Sir—Although not intended to be exhaustive in coverage, it is regrettable that Jones’s article omitted Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802)—grandfather of Charles Robert—and arguably the greatest of the physician-poets. Through his *The botanic garden* (1789-91) and *The temple of nature* (1803), Darwin—the most eminent physician of his age, and a noted polymath (philosopher, botanist, inventor, evolutionist, and founder of the Lunar Society)—had a profound influence on the great romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, in particular, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. As King-Hele1 has pointed out, they were especially influenced by: *The loves of the plants* (1789), *The economy of vegetation* (1791), and *The loves of the triangles* (1798).

G C Cook
Hospital for Tropical Diseases, London NW1 0PE, UK

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