

- 3 Rothman KJ (ed): Causal Inference. Epidemiology Resources Inc., Chestnut Hill, MA, 1988.
- 4 Senn SJ. Falsificationism and clinical trials. *Stat Med* 1991; 10: 1679-92.
- 5 Poole C. Feelings and frequencies: two kinds of probability in public health research. *Am J Publ Health* 1988; 78: 1531-33.

SIR—I was surprised to read,¹ that research clinicians are suspected of having a secret method of translating their trial results into a language easily understood by their patients. The problem was solved with the introduction of the National Lottery in the UK, but the solution was so obvious that it did not seem worth publishing. The average layman knows that his chances of winning the lottery are small, but he also knows that “it could be you”, and he plays the lottery on that understanding. He or she can therefore easily understand, for example, that although the risk of death during coronary artery bypass is 1-2%, “it could be you”. I always now explain risks and benefits of surgery or other treatment on that basis, and it works very well without adding much to the consultation time.

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- 1 Editorial. And now all this. *Lancet* 1997; 349: 1.

Physician-poets

SIR—Do doctors have an exceptional interest or talent for poetry (Jan 25, p 275),¹ 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*,² 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

Field of distinction	No of physicians
Poetry	72
Fiction, general literature	63
Scholarship, bibliography, scientific collecting	16
Invention	16
Crime	14
Art, music	13
The church	12
Piracy	12
Governors, administrators	11
Philosophy	10
Law, politics	10
Explorers	7
Sports, games	7
Drama	7
Philanthropy	4
Aeronautics	4
Ambassadors	4
Saints	3
The stage	2
Soldiers	2
Rosicrucianism	1

Doctors' fields of distinction outside medicine

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 sainthood; 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.

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- 1 Jones AH. Literature and medicine: physician-poets. *Lancet* 1997; 349: 275-78.
- 2 Monro TK. *The physician: as man of letters science and action* (2nd ed). Edinburgh: E&S Livingstone, 1951.

SIR—Although not intended to be exhaustive in coverage, it is regrettable that Jones' article omitted Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802)—grandfather of Charles Robert—and arguably the greatest of the physician-poets.¹ 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,^{2,3} in particular, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. As King-Hele³ 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).

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