Many years ago, C.C. Okell wrote: “If we add anything further to the medical curriculum let it be spare time”. The physician of today is far too embroiled in his medical activities to have time for other interests. The medical profession has become so taxing that the doctor is denied the opportunity of acquiring a wider education or even some relaxation. The great medical writer Sir. William Osler opined “No man is really happy or safe without a hobby and it makes little difference what his outside interest may be – botany, beetles or butterflies - anything will do so long as he straddles a hobby and rides it hard”.

Philately, the systematic collection and study of stamps has been described as the hobby of kings and the king of hobbies—and for once such a description may not be an exaggeration. Although novices, and many advanced stamp collectors, collect all kinds of stamps and are generalists, specialisation is the order of the day and it is possible to specialise in stamps. The specialist collects stamps that depict a particular theme. This specialisation is known as thematic philately. Birds, Animals, trains, personalities and music are some of the common topics.

Medical philately forms one of the sophisticated topics within the themes. Medical philately is a popular pastime and not surprisingly, is particularly popular among doctors. Within medicine, there are different themes. For instance, paediatric philately would include stamps that represent themes related to different aspects of paediatrics. A Medline search for “philately” shows as many as 2000 hits, implying that medical journals and doctors treat philately with considerable respect.

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Dwanwanthiri-
The God of medicine

Witch doctor

Hippocrates

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The physician fighting disease is an enduring medical image in the history. Stamps with a medical motif depict this struggle. The first stamp with a medical theme is considered to be from Nevis in 1861 as it shows what is purported to be Hygeia, the Greek Goddess of medicine. The first Indian stamp with a medical logo was issued in the erstwhile Travancore state in 1931. It was a regular “Anchal” stamp of Travancore with the words “medical revenue” inscribed on it. The revenue collected was used for the treatment of tuberculosis patients.

Reviving the history of medicine.

The history of the art of healing is well illustrated on stamps. The evolution of the practice of healing right from the prehistoric ages when man relied on prayers and witch doctors, through the ages of Ayurveda and Homeopathy and then to the advent of scientific medicine right upto genetic engineering is well featured on stamps.

Honouring the scientists.

As one would expect, the majority of people who’ve been honoured on postage stamps with a medical theme are physicians. The first of these, however, were honoured not for their contributions to medicine, but for their contributions to the liberation of their country. Thus, the American stamp of 1869, which depicts Trumbull’s painting of the Declaration of Independence, contains three of the

Aretaeus
Claude Bernard
Minkowski and Banting
Conquerors of diabetes
Laennec-Inventor of Stethoscope
Avicenna-The great Arabic physician

Robert Koch
Louis Pasteur
five doctors who signed the document—Josiah Bartlett, Benjamin Rush, and Oliver Wolcott. There have since been numerous stamps honouring physicians for their contributions in different fields of medicine. The most visible faces on medical stamps belong to Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur.

Every year since 1963 Sweden has been issuing stamps commemorating those who won the Nobel Prize 60 years earlier. So in 2068 we can expect to see stamps honouring the 2008 Nobel Prize winners in medicine Harald zur Hausen discoverer of human papilloma viruses causing cervical cancer and two other European researchers Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and Luc Montagnier discoverers of HIV.

**Awareness of diseases.**

Postage stamps are an effective means to create awareness of many diseases and of campaigns to deal with them. Many stamps are issued that exhort the importance of diabetes and hypertension control, early detection of cancer and prevention of many diseases.

Stamps help to dispel the myths that surround certain diseases.

**Raising funds.**

Many countries regularly issue stamps to raise funds to fight against many diseases and to help in the research, these stamps are called semipostals. Such stamps are sold at a higher value than the regular postal value, with the additional money being used for a specific purpose.

**Life style modifications.**

Many stamps are there which carry strong messages against drug abuse and smoking. Postal stamps continue to illuminate the noble acts of blood and organ donation.

From the next issue on let us absorb ourselves into the fascinating world of medical philately. What former US president Franklin Roosevelt said about philately in general is certainly true for medical philately: “It dispels boredom, enlarges our vision, broadens our knowledge and enriches our lives.”