

ARS LONGA, VITA BREVIS



I recently found a stack of my childhood books that included my seventh grade Latin textbook. I had heavily annotated it with pictures of airplanes, racecars, and rockets as well as caricatures of my ancient, kilt-wearing British schoolmaster. There was almost nothing in my juvenile scribbling that related to Latin with the exception of a diatribe against the need to study the language at all. My argument was that, just because a bunch of rich Texas oil barons got sick of sending their sons to Eton in England, I was somehow stuck in the school they built in Texas as a substitute. The stack of books I found also included my quarterly evaluations from seventh grade. My Latin teacher described me as a “spectacular underachiever who has failed to demonstrate any appetite for learning.” Ouch. That criticism was probably spot on.

Somehow, those years of Latin eventually permeated my thick skull and enabled me to decode the occasional phrase. This skill is useful in exactly two situations in life: taking the verbal portion of the SATs and preventing boring people at parties from making you feel stupid. The next time someone hits you with a Latin phrase, respond with this little gem: *ars longa, vita brevis*. It is perfect, because nobody knows what it really means. Sure, the literal translation is *art is long, life is short*. The phrase comes from the Latin translation of Hippocrates’ *Aphorismi*, his collection of pithy one-liners on how to fix various ailments. In the most basic sense, the phrase can be interpreted as meaning that artists will come and go, but their art endures. The tricky part is that the original Greek word for art that Hippocrates used is actually best translated as *technique or craft*. Moreover, the lines that follow read, “the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.”¹ When examined in this context, the phrase *ars longa, vita brevis* starts to sound like a warning that Hippocrates has spent most of his life

figuring out the tedious craft of medicine, so you had better heed his advice.

Hippocrates’ *Aphorismi* contains very little ophthalmic advice. He states, “In a fever not of the intermittent type, if a lip, an eye-brow, an eye, or the nose, be distorted; or if there be loss of sight or of hearing, and the patient be in a weak state-whatever of these symptoms occur, death is at hand.”² I suppose that is somewhat helpful. In medicine, we make use of aphorisms all the time. We learn these clinical pearls from experienced colleagues in the hallways at meetings as opposed to published reports on clinical trial results or a package insert. Aphorisms tell us where the mines are buried and help us steer clear, so I will share a few aphorisms of my own. It is for you to decide whether or not they are correct. I hope you enjoy these aphorisms as well as the other pearls contained in this issue of *CRST*:

1. Surgically eliminate the monovision of a habitual user at your peril.
2. Once patients hear that their lens implant might be defective, the thought never leaves their head until the offending implant does.
3. Some patients enter and exit your care unhappy, and there is nothing you can do in the middle to change that.
4. When formerly myopic LASIK patients develop presbyopia, they often conclude that their LASIK has worn off.
5. Presbyopia is so abhorrent that some people will put up with almost anything to escape it. ■

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1. The meaning and origin of the expression: *Ars longa, vita brevis*. The Phrase Finder website. <http://bit.ly/1T9C1t6>. Accessed March 25, 2016.

2. Hippocrates, *Aphorismi*, Section IV. <http://bit.ly/1RrK1oF>. Accessed March 25, 2016.