



Practice Makes Practice

BY DANIEL J. BRESSLER, MD

Cognitive dissonance is the unpleasant feeling that occurs from trying to maintain contradictory or opposing ideas. Imagine the headache from trying to be both politically conservative and liberal or even from trying to be simultaneously a die-hard Padres and Giants fan.

For as long as I remember, I've heard the phrase "practice makes perfect" and internally nodded in agreement as if assenting to an abstract universal law of human progress. But the idea of perfection always struck me as incompatible with the real world, the world I actually inhabit. This strikes me as increasingly obvious and important the longer I "practice" medicine. It's not just that the science and technology keep changing at breakneck speed; it's also that I continuously discover that I've been applying past knowledge incorrectly or, at least, "suboptimally."

As I'm sure many times a patient of yours has responded to some error by pointing out — imagining that you've never heard it before — "Well, Doc, I guess that's why they call it the practice of medicine." He's right, of course, even if the joke is a tired one. We "merely" practice our craft in all its varied dimensions: technical, psychological, logistical, collegial. We might have moments where we "nail it": perform a procedure flawlessly, prescribe just the right cocktail of drugs, say just the right word, adjust the settings just right, etc. But the flawless pearl sits on our professional necklace along with a bunch of rather more homely stones. We get better (we hope), but we don't get perfect.

I've responded to the cognitive dissonance between my childhood's "practice makes perfect" and my adulthood's recognition of perfection's unreachability with this little poem. I hope it speaks to the part of you that finds a kind of pleasure in the relentless pursuit of improvement for our patients and ourselves. **SDP**

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| 1. | <i>Practice makes perfect
Or so I was told
Hard work rewarded
With ribbons and gold.</i> | <i>Practice makes perfect
Is yesterday's news
A sweet childhood tale
A saccharine excuse.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
I heard someone say
Keep your nose to the
grindstone
You'll be honored one day.</i> | 3.
<i>Practice makes practice
Dispatch from the world
There is no perfection
No banner unfurled.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
Is easily said
It trips off the tongue
Like a prayer before bed.</i> | <i>Practice makes practice
The evidence indicates
Dispelling perfection
Experience vindicates.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
Is a hope and a dream
The quest of a hero
The vow of a king.</i> | <i>Perfection's a rumor
Practice a fact
Life's demonstration
Act-upon-act.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
A glint and a spark
A flickering candle
A guide in the dark.</i> | <i>Practice makes practice
Permit me to say
Give up on perfection
Practice today.</i> |
| 2. | <i>But practice makes
perfect
Is a ruse and a lie
A fake bill of goods
A lunatic's cry.</i> | <i>Practice makes practice
I'm here to report
A brick house's blueprint
No timeshare resort.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
Is an idiot's story
It signifies nothing
A crusade without glory.</i> | 4.
<i>Practice makes perfect
Draws life in a line
Practice makes practice
Is a spiral design.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
Is deceitful and wrong
Pretty words, maybe
But a conjurer's song.</i> | <i>Practice makes perfect
Says the fool to the wise
With a lilt in his voice
And a glint in his eyes.</i> |
| | <i>Practice makes perfect
Simple and false
A map to no treasure
A mismeasured waltz.</i> | <i>Practice makes practice
Says the wise to the fool
You learn this with time
Or you'll go back to
school.</i> |

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