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Chekhov: playwright and physician.

A sketch of the brief medical career of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860–1904) may be of passing interest. Son of a Taganrog grocer and grandson of a serf who had to buy his freedom, he was sent to read Medicine in Moscow, qualifying in 1884.

Under the nom-de-plume Antosha Chekhonte his literary talent surfaced in cheap and allegedly slightly pornographic and cheap magazines, whilst still a student. He practised Medicine, full-time at first, then moved to Melikhovo, outside Moscow and writing gradually became his prime work. Ivanov, his first play (1887) was a failure; his second, *The Seagull* (1896), was ridiculed in St Petersburg. Later, the New Moscow Arts Theatre successfully produced *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *Three Sisters* (1901) and his genius was finally confirmed with *The Cherry Orchard* (1903).

Biographers focus on two medical exploits. Shortly after qualifying he decided to visit a penal colony at Sakhalin in Siberia, undertaking a long and arduous journey on foot, by cart and boat. He produced a comprehensive report of the island, its inhabitants and their multitude of illnesses, based on appalling and inhumane living conditions. After publication, governmental censorship swiftly quashed any further comment or corrective action. Similarly, despite the suggestion to the University of Moscow that Chekhov's labours were worthy of academic recognition, none was bestowed. Two years later, in his first year in Melikhovo he was made superintendent of services to counteract a fierce outbreak of cholera.

Like so many great artists and writers of his era, he fell victim to tuberculosis, and is said to have first coughed up blood on his 25th birthday. Doubtless the hardships of his expedition to Sakhalin aggravated his symptoms. He tried numerous remedies, alas in vain. He died in Badenweiler in 1904, attempting the "cure". Chekhov was one of those fascinating characters who left Medicine and achieved fame and distinction in other ventures; Lord Moynihan called them "Medical Truants."