Medical philately, the collection and study of stamps related to medicine, poses an interesting challenge because stamps’ medical significance is not always readily apparent. As well, many of the “doctors” they honour are not doctors of medicine.

It is difficult to define what medical stamps are because they can depict people with a medical or scientific background who have made a significant contribution to medicine, or they can refer to an event, medical discovery or a person. Some of them even honour medicine’s “truants” — those who gave up on medicine to pursue another career. Famous examples include Anton Chekhov, the great Russian dramatist, and Georges Clemenceau, the French statesman.

An interest in the history of medicine brought me to philately quite by accident, and I soon learned that the story of a lifetime can be told on these tiny pieces of paper. I’ve pursued the hobby because of an interest in history and not as an investment.

A handful of Canadian stamps commemorate health and medical themes. Some notable examples involve Canadian physicians who have made a mark outside medicine. For instance, Sir Charles Tupper (1821-1915) was founding president of the CMA and Father of Confederation who also served briefly as prime minister. Dr. James Naismith (1861-1939) invented the game of basketball, and Dr. Robert Tait McKenzie (1867-1918) was renowned as an educator and sculptor. Dr. John McCrae (1872-1918) was well known as a physician but is best remembered for his famous poem.

A 1941 Newfoundland stamp and a 1965 Canadian stamp commemorated Sir Wilfred Grenfell (1865-1940) and his turn-of-the-century mission to the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, and subsequent founding of the Grenfell Mission.

A 1969 Canadian stamp marked the 50th anniversary of the death of William Osler (1849-1919), while the contributions of Frederick Banting (1891-1941) and Charles Best (1899-1978) were commemorated in a 1971 stamp marking the 50th anniversary of the discovery of insulin; a 1991 stamp also honoured Banting.

A 1980 Canadian stamp commemorates Dr. Emmanuel-Persil-lier Lachapelle (1845-1918), the founder of Montreal’s Notre Dame Hospital. Meanwhile, a 1981 stamp honoured female medical pioneer Dr. Emily Stowe (1831-1903), whose career was closely linked with that of Dr. Jennie Kidd Trout (1841-1921), who was honoured by Canada Post in 1991.

The work of controversial thoracic surgeon Norman Bethune (1890-1939) is commemorated in 2 stamps issued in 1990, while Wilder Penfield (1891-1976) and Howard Griffith (1894-1985) were both honoured in 1991.

Not all of Canada’s medical stamps commemorate people. Other subjects have included the Canadian Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, the electron microscope and cobalt cancer therapy, as well as events such as the Terry Fox Marathon of Hope.

This indicates that the precise definition of a “medical stamp” is difficult indeed. The field is so broad that I continue to learn of other aspects of it from medical philatelists and historians. An insightful account of Canadian physicians and philately may be found in History, Heroes and Hockey, written by Canadian surgeon and medical historian Gordon J. Mack. — Dr. Venita Jay, Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto

The story of a medical lifetime, told in a stamp

This 1969 stamp marked the 50th anniversary of Osler’s death