In Rome's famous Piazza Di Spagna, beside the Spanish Steps to the south, on the second floor of No. 26 are the rooms where John Keats spent the last 3 months of his life and where he died in 1821 at the age of 26. Once an 18th-century hotel, 26 Piazza Di Spagna is now a Keats-Shelley memorial, commemorating the English romantic poets, particularly Keats, Shelley, Byron and Leigh Hunt. Walking down the Spanish Steps and past the Bernini fountain, one enters the Via Condotti, one of Rome's leading areas for high fashion shopping.

Nearly 50 years ago, the Piazza Di Spagna was crowded, even as it usually is today. But not with tourists or those seeking high fashion. Allied columns had just entered Rome and the last elements of the German occupying forces moved through the Piazza and streamed northward out of the city. Moments later, a British Captain Mason and A. C. Sedgwick, a New York Times correspondent attached to the American 5th Army, stopped their jeep at the foot of the Spanish Steps and became the first visitors to the Keats house since the war began. Somehow the Italian curator had managed to keep the little museum intact throughout the war. As Sedgwick wrote, "The rooms had the smell more of England than of Italy"—leather books and Joseph Severn's portrait of Shelley sitting among the ruins of the Baths of Caracalia writing "Prometheus Unbound." There was the Severn sketch of a dying Keats, and perhaps more books about Keats and Shelley than exist anywhere in the world except the British Museum.

I suppose a doctor visiting Rome needs to find no excuse to write about Keats. As it turned out, there was medicine as well as poetry at 26 Piazza Di Spagna.

Almost everyone knows that Keats was educated as a physician. In the English terminology of the day he was an "apothecary" and licensed to practice medicine. It is also well known that he died of tuberculosis. Tuberculosis? He died in 1821. Robert Koch discovered the tubercle bacillus in 1882. At the time of Keats the disease was called consumption and aptly so because the victim was literally consumed. The treatment of Keats' last illness puts the history of tuberculosis and today's medicine in perspective.

When Keats became ill the stethoscope was not yet in use in England. It had just been described in Europe by Laennec. I was surprised to learn that artificial pneumothorax was suggested by Carson in Liverpool 1 year after Keats died. Although Carson wrote a book about it 10 years later, the procedure was not used clinically until the 1880s. Obviously, pneumothorax had to await Roentgen's discovery of X rays in 1895 to become practical therapy. The idea of rest and nourishment as a treatment for tuberculosis did not take hold until late in the 19th century. In Keats' day it had not been proved that tuberculosis was contagious and many physicians believed that it was not. Yet doctors and public health authorities made some amazingly accurate intuitive observations, as we shall see.

Keats had two brothers. His mother had died in 1810 of consumption while John was living at home. Later he took care of a brother who also died of consumption. In England in the summer of 1820 it was obvious that Keats himself was very ill. He was also in desperate financial condition, and his poetry had been excoriated by the critics. One day he came home with chills and fever. As he lay in bed coughing, Keats...
saw a drop of blood. For a physician turned poet in what was still the dark ages of medicine, he made an amazing prognosis: "Bring me the candle, Brown, and let me see this blood." Keats looked at the blood and calmly made an often-quoted diagnosis: "I know the colour of that blood; it is arterial blood . . . that drop of blood is my death warrant; I must die."

In a paper on Keats' fatal illness (1), Sir Russell Brock, a well known English surgeon, dealt in some detail with the reason for the accuracy of Keats' diagnosis. Although little was understood about tuberculosis, it was known that even a trivial amount of arterial blood had grave significance. Brock referred to this as a primary hemorrhage, distinct from a secondary hemorrhage, which usually was massive. As might be expected from a surgeon, Sir Russell refers contemptuously to a monograph on Keats’ death by the physician Sir William Hale-White. Russell wrote “It is remarkable that Hale-White does not differentiate between the small initial bleed and the main secondary hemorrhage . . . Hale-White was not a surgeon and perhaps did not appreciate the finer points of the natural course . . .?” It is not surprising that Lord Brock was disdainful of Hale-White’s nonsurgical analysis, but the physician Keats proved to be correct. On the very night of his prophetic diagnosis, a surgeon was called and, despite Keats’ weakened and debilitated condition, prescribed the treatment of the day—bleeding.

As the disease progressed, Keats was advised, in keeping with the medical wisdom of the time, to seek a warmer climate. His physician sent him to Rome. Keats had no money and would have been forced to go to Italy alone except that the artist Joseph Severn agreed to go with him. Severn was a rising young painter who had recently won a gold medal at the Royal Academy. Curiously, the trip was financed by Keats’ publisher, who gave him £100 for the copyright to the poem “Endymion,” which Keats had finished 2 years earlier.

“Endymion” had received scurrilous reviews. In Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine and The Quarterly, two of the most influential literary journals of the day, an anonymous writer called him “Johnny Keats” and his poem “dribbling idiocy.” He predicted that “his book seller would not a second time venture 50 pounds on anything he can write. It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop, Mr. John, back to the ‘plasters, pills and ointment boxes.’ But for heaven sake . . . be a little more sparing of soporics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.”

The sea voyage from England took 2 months including 10 days of quarantine in a Naples harbor. In mid-November 1820, an exhausted Keats and the faithful Severn finally arrived in Rome. As is the fate of many who are ill and seek health and solace in a gentler clime, Keats found neither in Rome.

His doctor in Rome was James Clark, who had been a surgeon in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1819 he began medical practice in the large and fashionable English colony in Rome. It was Clark who had arranged lodging for Keats and Severn at the pink stone building next to the Spanish Steps. Clark was kind and attentive to Keats and did what he thought best for him. But regarding Keats’ medical condition, he wrote, “The chief part of his disease, so far as I can yet see, seems to be seeded in his stomach. I have some suspicion of disease of the heart and it may be of the lungs . . . if I can put his mind at ease I think he will do well.” Clark would not get high marks for that diagnostic appraisal even on the basis of 1820 standards.

Clark’s subsequent history as a physician is interesting and shows that, then as now, doctors are difficult to evaluate and their professional success or failure is at times inexplicable. In 1826 Clark moved his practice to London and became physician to King Leopold of the Belgians and to Queen Victoria. While at the Court of St. James, he examined a Lady Flora Hastings and diagnosed her as pregnant. In disgrace, she died of a malignant ovarian cyst. Yet this misdiagnosis did not diminish Dr. Clark’s career. He went on to treat Albert, the Prince Consort, and failed to diagnose his fatal illness, which proved to be typhoid fever. Despite all this he remained physician to the Queen and became a baronet, a Fellow of the Royal Society and a member of the Senate of the University of London. He even wrote a monograph on tubercular phthisis in a famous medical text.

Although nothing was known of the contagious nature of tuberculosis, and some physicians denied it, Italian law required that everything in the apartment where Keats died had to be burned. Even the wallpaper had to be scraped away. Thus, none of the original furniture remains in the present Keats–Shelley memorial. In that remote day, Keats was able to make an accurate prognosis and somehow there was the unspoken knowledge that the disease was contagious. The public health authorities knew something that the doctors did not.

It is ironic that in 1821, his last year, Keats was obsessed with the idea that he would die before creating anything great. He said, “If I had time I would have made myself remembered.” At the time of his death he did not know that his poetry written in 1819, the annus mirabilis, would ensure his immortality. His words in his “Ode to the Nightingale” were true of himself:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird:
No hungry generations tread thee down.

Keats knew that he was dying and even in extremis thought about his friend Severn. “Severn, I bequeath to you all the joy and prosperity I never had. It would be second death to me if I knew your goodness now was your loss hereafter.” Did Keats suspect that Severn might contract his illness? Fortunately, Severn died not. Despite his profound exposure to what must have been active tuberculosis, Severn lived to the age of 86 and later served as British consul in Rome, where he died.
Long after his death there was the lingering idea that Keats had died not of disease but from the shattering criticism of his poetry. Dr. Clark's autopsy report said, "The lungs were entirely destroyed and the cells were quite gone." If Lord Byron had known this perhaps he would not have written in "Don Juan":

John Keats, who was killed by one critique . . .

and later in the same poem:

Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle should let itself be snuffed out by an article.

On his tombstone, Keats requested the simple words:

Here lies one whose name was writ in water.

Scholars have long debated what he meant. Whatever his intent, Keats could not have known how indelible that "water" would be.