



The green journal book review

The doctor as the patient: doctors recount their experiences on the other side of the consultation desk, edited by Rodger Charlton, Sharon Worcester and David Orlans, Solihull, UK, What's in a Story Publishing, 364 pp., £15.00 (plus postage and packing) available from the publisher's website directly, ISBN 978-1-0686053-0-7

This is an interesting collection of reflections on when doctors become unwell (or close members of their family) and seek medical attention. Those of us (of a certain age) will be able to think about when we have been ill ourselves, remember what happened during that time, and think about how it might have been different from what occurred in reality. Those of us who have looked after doctors, and their families, will think about the challenges and rewards of this work, and about how we might practise better in the future.

So what's in the book? The editors advertised for contributions to this book several years ago. These contributions are published in an anonymised format, and the list of contributors is at the beginning of the book: there are a few well-known names amongst them. The editors have examined all the submissions and brought them together in chapters dealing with a number of themes. At the start of each chapter are a few pages of introductory text which raises some of the learning points for that chapter of the book. The editors have suggested that not all of the submissions need to be read from start-to-finish and indeed I looked through all the chapters but did not read all of the submissions for this book review. There are 12 chapters in total: dealing with a wide range of issues including mental illness, communication issues and the state of the NHS in general. In addition, COVID-19 and the aftermath of the pandemic are presented and considered. Contributions are very varied: some are long and some are short, and the medical diagnoses range considerably. Reading these testimonies was at times quite moving: it was as if I was listening to someone telling me, in a private and confidential setting, about their ordeal and of their experience of being unwell.

Of course, the topic of seeing the system from the other side of the bed sheets or consulting room desk is not that new. When I read this book I did think again

about the late Dr Kate Granger, the young geriatrician who died of a rare form of sarcoma in 2016, and of her work to encourage clinicians to introduce themselves to patients. Her impetus to start this campaign came from seeing how little this was done to her. Some of the cases presented in this book suggest that such interactions and behaviours of medical practitioners have not changed all that much – given how 'breaking bad news' was performed poorly in the experience of some of the contributors to this book.

There were a number of themes that I did recognise from the book by reading approximately half of the contributions. One was that doctors are not great at deciding where and when to seek medical care. Some of this related to their concerns that their actions might be considered inappropriate and perhaps time-wasting of busy clinicians. Others were concerned that their anxieties and worries about certain potential diagnoses would be dismissed by colleagues. There were also concerns that being ill wasn't justifiable or permissible in busy clinical lives and that those that they worked with would be unduly burdened by a colleague 'going off on the sick'.

Others talked about the terrible ordeal they had during assessment and admissions to hospital in which they endured without any form of analgesia for hours (if not longer). This made them reflect on the importance of analgesia for their patients in the future. Some contributors witnessed and endured long waits in acute hospitals, interacted with stressed and over-worked staff, and the impact this had on them and their families.

Shared decision-making and patient involvement are important in modern medicine but, sometimes, contributors wanted to be removed from this burden by a specialist who could give them a working plan for the future – removing all worries about making a decision by the medical patient. As the young doctor (aged 28) with thyroid cancer says: '*We wanted someone else to steer the ship, so we could concentrate on keeping the deck in one piece.*' I think this illustrates that there are times in all our lives when you are quite content when an experienced clinician clearly explains the next steps of treatment and what should happen next.

Lastly, a number of contributors were incredibly positive concerning their experiences, particularly

with the NHS. I noted that several contributors had battled malignancies for many years and had experienced care (good and not-so-good) over that time. For some individuals, this had been the best part of two decades. I think much can be learned from their testimonies: they saw the bigger picture of the NHS and recognised that, at times, communication and events were not always the best. However, in the long term, they saw that the NHS was a wonderful system that had saved their life.

Would I recommend that you buy this book? Well, if you are in the position of looking after any member of the medical community, or plan to be ill yourself, then I think you would find it a rewarding read!

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