

Book review

BETTER DOCTORS, BETTER PATIENTS, BETTER DECISIONS: ENVISIONING HEALTH CARE 2020

G. Gigerenzer and J. A. M. Gray
The MIT Press, 2011.
ISBN 978-0-262-01603-2.

This book is a treasure trove of information about why the health system is not working well. It is not so strong on practical ways to change it, despite well-qualified authors and interspersed chapters recounting group discussions. The book is the proceedings of a 2009 conference, reporting both the papers and a synthesis (not a consensus) of the debates at the conference.

The book starts boldly: 'Patients appear to be the problem in modern high-tech health care: they are uninformed, anxious, noncompliant folk with unhealthy lifestyles'. This chapter, as well as introducing the book, introduces the first of four parts, on health literacy (which includes chapters on shared decision making and reducing unwarranted variation). The second and third parts are about health illiteracy, discussing problems of reporting of research and statistical illiteracy. Chapters in these sections report depressing research about the extent of statistical illiteracy among clinicians, with the consequence that many (most?) clinicians are not qualified to advise patients of risks of particular pathways and odds of particular outcomes. Numerous policy (and research) suggestions are made in the round table discussions in these two parts, but some are bold without clarity of implementation pathways (or even agents to lead implementation), some are tried and true (teach medical students better) and some simply reiterate the problem.

The final section is a grab bag of future-oriented chapters with two further round table discussions, on better evidence and 'a manifesto for change'.

There is no doubt the issues canvassed in this book are important, and the position of the book is one with which it is easy to agree: health care would be better served with more informed patients who can digest and understand health information better. Health care would also be better served if the same were true of doctors, too. The strengths of the book are that it advances those causes articulately and well. The book is soundly based in evidence (good citations abound), and is a useful addition to the library of academics interested in patient and clinician decision making.

For a policy wonk, the book suffers from the 'so what?' question. The policy prescriptions cannot be picked up easily. However, the authors would probably argue that the problems are complex and so too will be the solutions. Quick fixes will not be found in this field and better understanding (which is what this book is all about) is an essential part of the platform for future change, and that is all the book can hope to contribute. Which it does.

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