

Being a Doctor: Understanding medical practice

Hamish Wilson and Wayne Cunningham

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There are 573 000 000 Google hits on 'Being a doctor', with a thousand practical 'how to' texts and numerous guides on how to get it right and how not to get it wrong.

So—in the internet age, is there a place for another 'book' about what makes doctors and patients think and behave in the way that they do? Having read *Being a Doctor* by Hamish Wilson and Wayne Cunningham, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes! The authors, two good keen blokes from Dunedin, have produced a volume of perceptive range and depth—part practical guide to good medical practice, part philosophical treatise, part science, and lots and lots about the art of medicine.

The ideas for the book developed from a postgraduate course that the authors have led for the last 20 years at the University of Otago about the 'nature of medical practice'. The content of the book is thus based on their own experience as teachers and practising physicians and the discussions and debate they have had with their cohorts of students over many years. This gives a scholarly tone to the book which fits well with its stated aim of exploring the 'meaning' of being a doctor and providing tools for reflective practice, particularly to vocational trainees and their teachers.

The book has a logical order and flow, and throughout there is an appropriate use of both a local and international evidence base to support the main topics under discussion. Many of the themes are illuminated with the use of personal case vignettes.

While the writing throughout is evidence based, we are given clear insight into the authors preferences in both the style and values of general practice. Biomedicine, for example, is recognised for its role in current practice but also because of the

authors' insistence that we do not 'fall under its spell'. This book duly celebrates its counterpoint of holistic care, and also celebrates the tools of the holistic trade, notably narrative and story-telling.

The book unashamedly takes pride in the uncertainty and 'messiness' that characterises general practice. There is considerable commentary about 'heart sink' and what it means to doctors and to patients, and there is a partial revisitation of some of those themes in a chapter on 'illness without disease', a discussion about somatic presentations of illness. The book possibly overstates the problem element here; somatisation is seen as the 'bane of medical practice', rather than an area where advances in biomedicine might happily co-exist with bio-psychosocial neighbours.

The doctor-patient relationship and the consultation are central to general practice, and three chapters are devoted to the relationship itself, the problems experienced, and the models of the consultation in which that relationship is played out.

In addressing these themes the writing is confident and sure—for they are the authors' 'very stuff of general practice'. The same is true of the chapter on reflective practice, where the authors are clearly at home and writing with enthusiasm about values and practice they hold dear. And their enthusiasm is infectious, giving us permission to 'stop the clocks' for a moment in the busyness of the clinical round, and work out once more why we got into this 'game'.

A major portion of the text is focused on the doctor. How can we look after ourselves given the stress of practice, what is the culture in which we practise and how can we walk with integrity through all of this? The guidance and advice in these chapters is well written and salutatory. The authors remind us that the high rates of stress

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and burnout doctors experience can lead to unhappy endings for ourselves and our patients and that there are potent antidotes available through 'positive psychology' and 'mindfulness'.

To have a chapter on 'medical culture' might have some general practitioners fearful that a case is being made for an on-call sociologist. The reality is that the authors have identified an essential strand in the identity of what makes a doctor, and it is important that we are reminded of this. We have undergone a transformation from 'lay' citizen to members of the medical subculture characterised by collective loyalty to the rules of our profession. Within this, general practice might perceive itself fortunate to be characterised by cultural norms that are more respectful of others and accepting of uncertainty than other disciplines within medical practice.

The book draws to its conclusions by providing salient advice about the importance of patient safety in our training and practice, and contextualises general practice within the broader framework of primary care.

The final chapter appropriately draws together the main strands of thinking, to provide both a version and a vision of the future in which there will be a reconciliation between the strengths of 'biomedicine,' with its perceived harsh reductionist exterior, and the 'whole person care' delivered by 'whole person' doctors, with an emphasis on narrative and caring.

It is always hard to be all things to all readers. In starting from the beginning with each of the major themes, the book may at times seem basic in its initial premises and flow charts, outlining consultation models and illness pathways. This is a necessary preamble, for in each chapter the text builds to well-argued conclusions, tempered with practical guidance for those in the early years of training, and for experienced clinicians.

To some, the focus on reflection may border on introspection; and there is almost a paradox in the multitude of structural and process diagrams in chapters that are, in many ways, extremely well written essays on humanity.

Do you need to read *Being a Doctor: Understanding medical practice*? If you are a trainer or medical teacher, it would be negligent of you not to do so, for the book is sustenance and soul food of the highest order for educators. If you are a medical student filled with the spirit of enquiry, or a registrar trying to work it all out, this book will encourage you on the path to reflective practice. Go for it.

For the rest of us journeying clinicians, get hold of a copy and read it. You will rediscover the importance of things you know, and find pleasure in putting additional pieces into your understanding of what it means to be a doctor. And it will be fun, for two good keen blokes have written a very good keen book.

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