

BOOK REVIEW**“THE DOCTOR IN LITERATURE: SATISFACTION OR RESENTMENT?”**

Author: Solomon Posen

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This is a delightful book which I have thoroughly enjoyed reading. Entitled “The Doctor in Literature”, I had initially thought the title was inappropriate because at first glance the contents pages dealt with topics like bedside manner, history and physical examination, treatment, ward round, social status of physicians and the physician in court. The cover of the book showed a doctor in studious contemplation as he gazed at his patient, a child, perhaps wondering what to do next. I thought to myself, another medical book, so what is the difference?

My own concept of a literary medical book would perhaps be entitled “Literature in Medicine” where I would write about the important role that literature would have in inculcating certain human, philosophical, ethical and even moral values in the young medical mind and perhaps for the senior doctor it may offer a cup of tea with a newer flavour.

The author’s introduction mentions three aims of the book: firstly, it is an indexed work from 600 works of literature where fictional physicians, their attitudes and activities, are described by writers (literary ones); secondly, it gives an analysis of recurrent themes portraying medical doctors (their characters and personalities); and thirdly, it is written for the reading pleasure of everyone, including doctors. Then, when on page 3 of the introduction, one is confronted with “inclusion and exclusion criteria” and on page 10 with “satisfaction or resentment” (which forms the subtitle of the book), one may be led to suspect that the author Dr Solomon Posen has undertaken a Clinical Trial in this book. Indeed, his painstaking research of 1,500 passages from these 600 works of literature forms a body of evidence, with a good number from writers who were also doctors, like A J Cronin (*The Citadel*) and Somerset Maugham (*The Moon and Sixpence*).

The reader is enticed very readily, as he browses easefully, digesting anecdote after anecdote (anecdotal evidence) where writers create fictional doctors with a tinge of fact from real life (“genomic DNA”); and one appreciates the characterisation of doctors as they are portrayed as money-hungry, which led George Bernard Shaw to campaign for a salaried medical service rather than a system which allowed successful physicians to extract large fees from poor patients. Some stories tell of greedy doctors who resorted to fraudulent and unethical practices. But there were also doctors who were indifferent to money, “not rich in the bank but have quite enough” – the altruistic doctors.

As one becomes more engrossed in the book, moving from one topic to another, like the busy doctor: genius or sham, doctors’ recreational activities, bedside manner, their dressing, voice, facial expressions and gestures, inappropriate jokes, insensitivity, and even brutality; there were instances where patients resented their doctors’ manner of questioning at history-taking, their diagnostic approaches, the medical or surgical treatment which could be a torture for some patients, needlessly meted out by arrogant and sometimes cruel doctors. Some doctors were painfully ignorant while others amused themselves with their ward round antics and yet others pander to rich and powerful patients. There were also brave and heroic doctors, who lived by the Hippocratic Oath and stood their ground, even risking torture and death.

The book is replete with many anecdotes presenting the good, the bad and the ugly traits among these fictional doctors. The author correctly sums up in the conclusion of this “anecdotal based treatise” regarding the incongruity of medical fees and patient’s resentment, and conflicting demands for the doctor’s time; but underlying every theme, one is acutely aware of the doctor-patient relationship where the contract begins with the patient asking for the doctor’s help and the doctor offering his professional services. This time-honoured relationship, though sealed loosely, stands firmly even today. The doctor-patient relationship perhaps is the saving grace for all doctors, as it embodies an unspoken equally age-old idealistic

notion that all patients, regardless of their social status, deserve the doctors' best professional help at all times, even though the end result could be either satisfaction or resentment; satisfaction for the safe delivery of a child or the saving of a life, or resentment against the doctor's perceived greed, his arrogance or failure to deliver.

My own conclusion (with my own bias) after reading this book, is that more often than not, doctors are portrayed (though fictionally) as being unsatisfactory in the conduct of their professional duties, whether from greed, arrogance or treatment failure, because perhaps due diligence was not exercised. In practice, the commonest cause for this resentment is miscommunication or lack of communication. It is also my personal belief that in many of the cases portrayed, the writers are probably closer to the truth, as writers are students of human nature and their inclination is to write about human experience, their successes and failures. Literature is a study of how people live their lives, their hopes and aspirations, joys and miseries.

It would therefore be prudent and even wholesome for doctors, nurses and medical students to look at this mirror image of ourselves, so that we may be better able to address some of the challenges of the profession including our own shortcomings. These recurrent themes, portrayed time and again by many authors, need to be addressed and perhaps form some basis for the teaching of medical ethics to students. If we are willing to examine ourselves and see what the world perceives as our shortcomings, we could then be in a better position to improve ourselves and uphold our professional image.

One of the attractive aspects of this book is that it offers much pleasurable reading as there are numerous humorous anecdotes throughout the book, though often at the doctors' expense. It is necessary reading for all doctors, nurses, paramedical professionals, as well as medical students and patients, so they can appreciate one another's viewpoint; and for the patients, they can then understand why some doctors behave the way they do.

Another major strength of the book is the painstaking efforts made by Dr Posen to provide an extensive bibliography, a name index as well as a subject index, so that the reader or student can look up medical topics for research as they appear in fiction. This book has an important role as a major reference source and a copy should be made available in every medical and public library.

Objectively, and therefore on a scientific basis, though this "research treatise" does appear to take the form of a "clinical trial" in a broad sense, it is nevertheless not a "randomised control trial". I suspect there exists a selection bias where the shopkeepers outnumber the saints among the doctor population. In other words, a sampling error may exist. The principal investigator, Dr Solomon Posen has a very impressive track record which makes him eminently qualified to undertake this mammoth project. Dr Posen majored in English before obtaining his medical degree. As Professor Posen, he has taught General Medicine and Endocrinology at the University of Sydney for 30 years. He has published a series of papers on the Doctor in Literature.

As I wrote in the beginning, for me this book has been a delightful read. This book rates very high on top of the recommended reading list for everyone, be he doctor or patient. It is both entertaining and educational. Satisfaction is guaranteed. No question of resentment. It is retailed at a very cost-effective price.

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