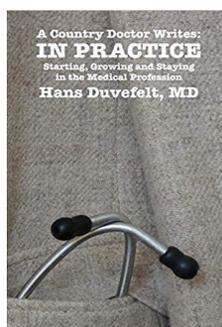
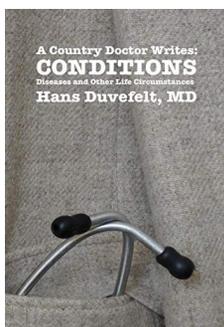


## BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

### **A Country Doctor Writes: CONDITIONS: Diseases and Other Life Circumstances; and A Country Doctor Writes: IN PRACTICE: Starting, Growing, and Staying in the Medical Profession**

Hans Duvefelt

*Self-published, 2020, 251 pp. ("CONDITIONS"), 265 pp., ("IN PRACTICE"), \$17 each, paperback*



Originally from Sweden, Hans Duvefelt, MD, trained at Central Maine Medical Center 40 years ago and has practiced in rural Maine ever since. In 2008, he began writing a reflective blog to document his medical experiences, and that writing ultimately became the basis for these collections of brief vignettes. The topics range from his initial impressions of medical school to meaningful personal connections with patients, difficult diagnoses, exciting patient encounters, and even his own experiences as a patient.

These books are collections of Dr Duvefelt's vignettes ranging from one to five pages long, which makes them easy to pick up or set aside when time is short. The stories are not chronologically arranged and each vignette is separate, so the reader does not need to consume the book sequentially. The common thread through the stories is the humanism of medicine, bringing light to the complex mixture of art and science when caring for patients in a rural medical practice. Dr Duvefelt frequently highlights his use of Sir William Osler's wisdom and medical reasoning, through which he has incorporated a philosophy of treating patients as individuals, preventing rather than treating disease, and a hands-on approach to patient care. In several vignettes,

he underscores the importance of his longitudinal relationship with his patients which allows him to understand their needs quickly and astutely, whether spoken or perceived. He also discusses familiar concerns with modern medicine, including the challenges of providing high-quality and equitable care in resource-limited settings. Furthermore, he illustrates the importance and beauty of being adept at identifying and managing a wide variety of conditions in a world that is becoming increasingly specialized and isolated.

In several vignettes, Duvefelt notes a transition of family physicians from diagnosticians to clinicians who manage chronic conditions, often with evidence-based targets and financial incentives for meeting certain quality metrics. While he does not actively resist this change, he does explore the concept on both an individual and a systemic level throughout these books. There is a contrasting thread woven throughout this collection of stories, in which he astutely identifies rare or missed conditions as a result of spending time and practicing deliberate listening with his patients. Furthermore, he includes several vignettes about his personal experiences as a patient, and what he desires from his own doctor. Ultimately, this reflects the reality of primary care medicine in rural environments: competing interests of patients, communities, physicians, medical groups, and health care systems; expertise in generalized medicine as well as key clinical findings of complex or rare conditions; and limited resources, not the least of which is time. Overall, these books are quick, easy reads that illustrate the complexities of rural family medicine and the importance of personal connection, especially for fostering the doctor-patient relationship and providing individualized care. However, the arrangement and volume of the vignettes leads to some redundancy, and the books may have had more impact if they were further distilled into the key moments in Dr Duvefelt's career. Students may delight in reading about clever exam techniques or diagnoses of exotic conditions while being reminded of the importance of slowing down and being present in the moment. More seasoned clinicians may relate to the push and pull of the health care industry, evolving

clinical guidelines, or the beauty of caring for a multigenerational family over time. For teachers of family medicine, there are several vignettes that can be shared with learners to ground and normalize some of their own experiences caring for patients.

Through his words as a seasoned and experienced generalist, Duvefelt reminds us all to examine why we practice medicine and to reflect on our experiences in a way that encourages not only learning, but also gratitude for the ability to participate in the many moments of our patients' lives.

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### **Breath Taking: The Power, Fragility, and Future of Our Extraordinary Lungs**

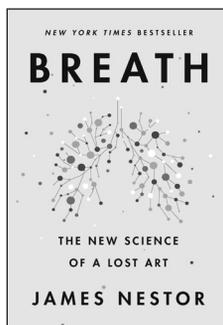
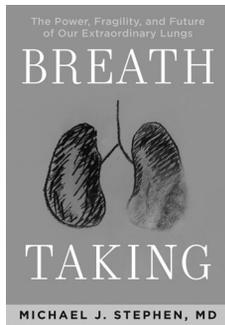
Michael J. Stephen

New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021, 311 pp., \$26, hardcover

### **Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art**

James Nestor

New York, Riverhead Books, 2020, 280 pp., \$28, hardcover



“Shut your mouth... Breathe through your nose.... Exhale [fully].... Chew [strongly].... Breathe more, on occasion.... Hold your breath.... How we breathe matters.” (Nestor, pp. 201-214).

These points summarize guidance from one of two excellent new books on the topic of breathing. Such is the power of the breath that even a quick demonstration of deep breathing can be a revelation to a patient who is distraught. Our patients have often internalized the notion that anxiety or stress requires medication. However, clinical experience and abundant scientific research<sup>1</sup> demonstrate how life changing it is when patients commit to the regular practice of deep breathing. Not only does their anxiety improve, but they experience a multitude of unexpected positive benefits, such as improved sleep and digestion, elimination of bruxism, and improved cardiovascular health.

Two recent books take very different approaches to the science and everyday relevance of breathing. *Breath Taking: The Power, Fragility, and Future of Our Extraordinary Lungs* by Michael Stephen, a researcher and pulmonologist at Thomas Jefferson University, is a professorial exploration of the lungs, the courage of patients in the face of devastating illness, and the importance of collaboration in the advancement of medicine.

*Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, by James Nestor, a science and sports journalist, takes a more journalistic approach in telling the story of “pulmonauts,” adventurers into the science and history of breath training. While Stephen’s book is a pleasant drive through a scenic landscape, Nestor’s *New York Times* bestseller<sup>2</sup> is a roller coaster ride, bumpy and exhilarating.

*Breath Taking* opens with a review of lung physiology and the history of advances in pulmonology. The tales of researchers unraveling the mysteries of our lungs are engrossing, and leave the reader wanting more. For example, Stephen describes University of Toronto surgeon Joel Cooper’s fascinating quest to perform viable lung transplants, including his pivotal discovery that he could suture a bit of omentum around the bronchial connection (p. 208). Cooper’s passion and innovations increased the life expectancy of patients receiving lung transplants from a few weeks to the present average of 6½ years.

*Breath Taking* shines in its historical notes and its clinical anecdotes. Stephen tells stories of patients with cystic fibrosis, addressing their daily struggles with great compassion; he also devotes considerable attention to the possibilities and current limitations of gene therapies for these patients.

Stephen also advocates for innovative, interdisciplinary treatment of disorders of the airway. He introduces Kevin Neff, a successful salesman who lost his voice and his job after a viral infection. Diagnosed with functional dysphonia, Kevin struggled to adjust, and he began studying for a new career in finance. Despite having been told his condition was irreversible, Kevin was completely cured at the Cleveland Clinic Voice Center, where otolaryngologist Claudio Milstein massaged Kevin's neck to break up scar tissue, and speech therapy helped him regain his voice (p. 198).

Stephen touches briefly on the history and science of yoga and deep breathing. He provides just enough information for the reader to understand how promising these techniques are. However, it feels like a missed opportunity in a book that is otherwise so satisfying, not to delve further into the impact of these techniques on our respiratory health. Stephen concludes with observations about COVID-19 and climate change, and how remaining healthy on this planet will require taking better care of our atmosphere and ourselves.

*Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* is quite a contrast, when it comes to writing style, pace, and perspective. Nestor ventures into numerous unexpected avenues, shifting between science and personal experience. He interviews "pulmonauts" ranging from otolaryngologists and orthodontists to voice coaches, neuropsychologists, gurus, athletes, and opera singers. All agree: how we breathe matters, the health of our jaws and noses and sinuses and lungs are inextricable, and modern medicine is missing out on some very powerful healing methods.

Nestor himself participated in a study conducted by Jayakar Nayak, at Stanford, which found that enforced mouth-breathing for just 10 days led to profound worsening of cardiovascular and nasal health metrics, and these negative effects reversed once the subjects began breathing through their noses (p. 206). *Breath* is replete with information about breathing that will likely be new to even the most experienced clinician. As a clinical psychologist, I have been teaching patients breathing techniques for decades, and yet much was new to me. For example, Nestor explains how humming (p. 223) increases nitric oxide levels 15-fold, with associated health benefits. One

recent commentary published in *Microbes and Infection* supported these assertions. It recommended studying humming and nasal breathing to improve outcomes in patients with COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> This book greatly heightens the reader's awareness about everyday breathing and eating practices; it inspires us to think about how our patients are increasing their anxiety and decreasing stamina with poor breathing and chewing habits. Nestor delves into the topic of jaw health and its links with sinus health, citing anthropological evidence about how modern diets negatively affect our jaw shape and bone strength. These changes then worsen airway obstruction and sinus problems (p. 125). Nestor includes appendices containing detailed guidance on how to perform breath work effectively, and how to improve nasal and jaw health.

In summary, both books are well worth reading. Stephen's is useful for physicians and those interested in medical history, and it deepens our appreciation of the complexity of our lungs. It highlights the courage and perseverance of lung patients and pulmonologists. Nestor's is written for the general public, and is the more thought-provoking and practical of the two. I have already recommended it to patients and friends ranging from engineers to yoga instructors, and am incorporating some of its suggestions in my own life. I encourage interested colleagues to learn more about the power of the breath, in order to help our patients achieve the best possible health.

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