

Becoming a Better Physician: Insightful and Inspirational Stories From Attending Physicians, Residents, and Medical Students

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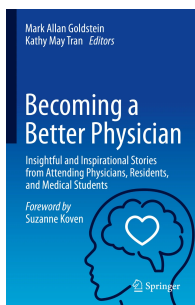
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Book Title: Becoming a Better Physician: Insightful and Inspirational Stories From Attending Physicians, Residents, and Medical Students

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Described as “a collection of essays by doctors and doctors-to-be, written for doctors and those interested in doctoring” (p. xi), this book features a diverse range of voices—across national and ethnic backgrounds, medical specialties, and levels of experience. While most contributors are affiliated with Harvard and other Boston-area institutions, the volume carries a polyphonic quality. With 45 essays, variation in quality is ineluctable, yet the editors have succeeded in maintaining a solid baseline of quality.

Many of the timeless themes of medical writing appear here: bearing witness, suffering with the patient, and the moral weight of care. However, the most compelling narratives are those that grapple with contemporary challenges. In “The Night I Almost Walked Away From Medicine,” Shan Liu recounts an emergency situation in which an X-ray technician refused to image a critical patient because “an order hadn’t been submitted.” “No Silence, Please!” by Farrin Manian and “Being Fired” by Michael Jellinek are about dedicating years of one’s career to an institution and being unjustly fired. Medicine is no longer the private, independent practice that many physicians still idealize, but the employed, bureaucratized, cog-in-the-machine current reality.

Erica Kaye’s “Hard Work” explores the persistent but ever-changing gender inequities in medicine, while “Free Refills” by Peter Grinspoon offers a candid and courageous account of opioid addiction, legal consequences, and recovery. A special highlight is Andrea Riley’s “Forging Trust,” which examines the tension between respecting parental autonomy and protecting vulnerable minors amid rising misinformation and waning medical authority.

The collection also includes a chapter on the “Physician as Patient,” along with essays about physicians as family of the patient and about losing a loved one. Several pieces reflect on the toll taken by the COVID-19 pandemic, a necessary inclusion that anchors the book in the recent shared crisis.

Despite its humanistic values, the collection is not without contradiction. A core challenge emerges: the individualistic ethos so deeply embedded in American culture. One author writes, “The most revolutionary practice I implemented in the past three years is self-compassion” (p. 100). While this may be a useful insight, it is also revealing. Many contributors do acknowledge that systemic and societal factors underlie the suffering of both patients and providers. Yet, the impulse to seek individual solutions to collective problems prevails—and is ultimately inadequate.

Another telling absence is that of family medicine. A few essays are set in primary care, but internists and pediatricians dominate the narrative. The perspectives in the book only reinforce the importance of the core skills of family medicine: doctor-patient relationship, communication, person-centered care, and managing uncertainty. Their marginal presence in the book reflects a broader issue in American health care.¹

Seeing physicians recognize their weaknesses and limitations is inspiring and a step forward. Nonetheless, we must strive not only to “become a better physician,” but to become better at medical education and, with more family medicine, become a better health care system and a better society.

Due to its literary quality and restrained use of jargon, this book is accessible to a broad audience. It will be of particular interest to struggling health care professionals and to readers curious about the nontechnical, human side of medicine. The essays also would make interesting material for medical humanities courses or mentorship programs. Unfortunately, the book’s academic-looking cover and stingy price may diminish its appeal to a lay audience.

REFERENCES

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<https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/afp-community-blog/entry/america-needs-more-family-doctors-working-toward-the-25-x-2030-goal.html>.