

What We Bring to the Practice of Medicine: Perspectives From Women Physicians

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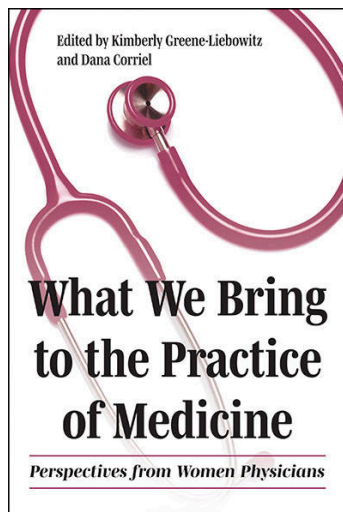
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Book Title: What We Bring to the Practice of Medicine: Perspectives From Women Physicians

Editors: Kimberly Greene-Liebowitz, Dana Corriel

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Written by women physicians, *What We Bring to the Practice of Medicine* is a collection of essays that provides role models, guidance, and inspiration for women considering a career in medicine. Pointing out that the body of literature from female physician writers dates back nearly 2,000 years, the editors then detail the history of women in medicine. The earliest record of the enrollment of women in medical school dates back to Heliopolis in Egypt in 1500 BCE, and medical recipes and remedies attributed to women appear in books written by male authors from this same period. While other surviving documents allude to manuscripts written by women, the oldest still in existence, *On Diseases and Cures of Women*, was written by Metrodora and dates back to the second century CE.

The editors go on to underscore that the overarching concerns of female practitioners have not changed over time, including clinical practice, the physician–patient relationship, career advancement, domestic responsibilities, work–life balance, bias and harassment, and barriers to success. What follows this well–researched and documented introductory history are collections of essays that delve further into these issues, providing inspiration, joy, hope, and a sense of solidarity.

Grouped into such themes as overcoming odds, compassion, humor, courage, surprise, sadness and grief, life balance, and inspiration, essays from more than 30 essayists are curated from a broad range of medical disciplines, ancestries, and backgrounds. Each entry is written in beautiful, meaningful prose and brings depth and insight to the topic considered. For example, in the poignant essay “If You Like Pina Coladas,” Julia Michie Bruckner describes pretending to be on an imaginary tropical vacation with a teenaged patient with sickle cell anemia, comforting the young girl’s spirit when she couldn’t cure her disease.

I loved those nights. We were on her terms—no bed, no rounds, no admonitions, no treatments. Her surly scowl was transformed into a surreptitious smile. I learned to seize those times, to meet her where she was, push my expectations of her a bit higher, forget about her disease until morning rounds.

—(p. 55)

Or in “The Secret Keeper,” Dawn Harris Sherling describes the privilege of holding our patients’ deepest confidences and confessions.

To be a doctor is to be a keeper of secrets. In holding onto our patients’ stories, we become the guardians of their truths, desires, and wishes. At times, the collective weight of these secrets may be a heavy burden to bear. Other days, we may find that the honor of bearing the burdens has made us stronger and capable of doing more.

While reading through the book cover to cover may be tempting, I found that each essay provided rich fodder for consideration and invited self-reflection on my own experience as a woman physician. My understanding of who I am and what I bring as a female doctor was enhanced by this endeavor. “Learning to Listen” by Audrey Nath invited consideration of the times when delving below the surface made a difference in one of my patients’ lives. “First to Report” by Kimberly Greene-Liebowitz compelled me to revisit my own experience of sexual harassment and to consider how I might help others with this experience heal. “The Twist of the Patient Apology” by Dana Corriel encouraged granting grace rather than holding onto hurts, recognizing that granting forgiveness empowers both ourselves and our patients.

I recommend this book to women in all phases of medical training, from student to practicing physician nearing retirement. Its thought-provoking prose invites journaling and careful thought for the individual reader as well as offers a group of readers interesting topics for discussion. The book, as an antidote to burnout, promotes mindfulness and a sense of purpose as we move through our days. Through its essays, we learn to appreciate our uniquely feminine traits that enhance our delivery of care, thereby increasing our fulfillment in our calling. The editors are to be applauded for their success in putting this book together.