

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Expecting Better: Why the Conventional Pregnancy Wisdom is Wrong—and What You Really Need to Know

Emily Oster

New York, Penguin Books, 2016, 313 pp., \$17, paperback



As every clinician who takes care of pregnant women knows, expecting mothers have lots of questions, and often our answers are not necessarily data driven. Emily Oster is an economist at Brown University with an interest in medical economics. In *Expecting Better*,

she attempts to ferret out fact from fiction and help the reader understand that some recommendations are not data driven, and to debunk the dogma of pregnancy—or at least explain its roots. In Dr Oster's view, "The key to good decision-making is taking information, the data, and combining it with your own estimates of pluses and minuses."

The book is very accessible and practically organized. Broken down into five parts—conception, first, second, and third trimesters, and labor and delivery—it is written for pregnant women, designed to be picked up and put down as questions arise during pregnancy. The chapter titles often give a flavor of the discussion. For example: "Home Birth: Progressive or Regressive? And Who Cleans the Tub?" Dr Oster's biases (for example, against home birth) are not hidden, and at the same time, she clearly makes an effort to present both sides fairly.

Oster makes great use of illustrative graphs, and her descriptions—for example, timing of ovulation, possible consequences of gestational diabetes, or how long the stages of labor are likely to be—are all very clear and accurate, designed for the lay person, but not dumbed

down. This book will definitely appeal to many patients curious about what to expect and why to expect it.

The foundation of Dr Oster's position is the idea that obstetrics suffers from a lack of good clinical studies and the "overinterpretation of flawed studies." Very true. She points out the lack of randomized controlled trials after a very succinct explanation of what they are. She looks for the data behind the recommendations and exposes the absence of data in many cases. She refreshingly points out how the pendulum of expert opinion swings from one extreme to the other. While Dr Oster encourages readers to examine the data and come to their own conclusions, she also astonishes with some of her own conclusions. For example, in discussing alcohol consumption in pregnancy, she points out that recommendations vary in different countries. In particular, she objects to the phrase "no amount of alcohol has been proven safe," concluding based on the lack of studies that perhaps "light drinking is fine." While she may be right, many patients might not understand the gamble of fetal alcohol syndrome. Patients' "estimates of the pluses and minuses" might not be balanced.

Overall, Dr Oster's research is comprehensive, her descriptions are clear, and her arguments are well considered, yet they, like the data, are not definitive. Sometimes, as we know especially well in obstetrics, there is not a randomized controlled trial to definitively prove a point, and we must rely on the best available evidence and experience. To me, this naturally invites an opportunity for discussion. Dr Oster, however, misses the opportunity to direct the patient back to her clinician for what should be an important patient-centered discussion and decision-making process. This diminishes the book's potential to be a great patient resource to being only a good one, and only in the hands of the right patient.

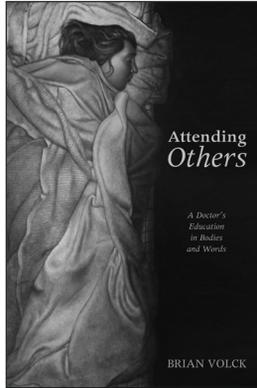
doi: 10.22454/FamMed.2018.144438

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Attending Others

Brian Volck

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016, 206 pp., \$25, paperback



When the scholarship to pay for graduate studies in English literature did not come through, Brian Volck went with his “Plan B”: medical school. He became a truly gifted primary care physician (pediatrician), but we can all be grateful that he didn’t stop writing.

He is in the elite company of others—such as the late Richard Selzer, surgeon and author—who heal both body and soul via skillful contributions to both medicine and literature.

In *Attending Others*, Dr Volck shares his personal odyssey, revealing in it lessons critical for those who seek proficiency in the healing arts. “Stories weave the fabric of my lessons in doctoring” (page 11). Early in the book he credits mentors who taught him the meaning of being an *attending* physician: they listened, spoke with care, and never stopped learning. These three characteristics are explored, like a symphonic theme and variations, throughout personal stories recounted in the book.

For example, when speaking of the importance of attentive listening, Volck defines writing as “a practice of focused attention and response...” (p 9). While specifically referring to the exercise of his art, one cannot avoid drawing a parallel to the writing all physicians do. Good physicians listen, yet how many of us view our medical documentation (writing!) as focused attention and response to our patients, rather than mere administrative drudgery? Perhaps we should.

Through the very personal episodes he shares, Dr Volck stresses the importance of speaking with care. The reader experiences with him a sinking heart when a childhood friendship is damaged by a racial comment spoken in jest, or when inadvertent offense is

given in a professional setting. The author’s soul is bared as he shares his gaffes, and the reader benefits from the lessons learned. Countless poignant examples of both the healing and hurting power of words illustrate the importance of speaking with care.

Continuing education ought to be a hallmark of all physicians. However, restricting oneself to textbooks and journals is short-sighted. “I learned as much from patient encounters and stories told in exam rooms” as from textbooks and journal articles, the author states. He then drives the point home by stressing “almost all the books that schooled me in the fraught world of doctor-patient encounters came from outside the peer-reviewed medical canon: short stories... novels... memoirs...” (p 123). While appropriately valuing biomedical education, Dr Volck reminds readers how critical it is for the physician to be well-read in nonmedical literature in order to be proficient in human interactions. How often this is forgotten!

Near to the heart of family physicians is the author’s explicit appreciation of the importance of generalists, especially those in primary care practice. Though at the time of writing this book he had transitioned to a hospitalist practice, he is not among those who might disparage the “local MD.” Rather, he draws on his experiences in primary care to continue to “practice the presence in touching my patients, in hearing their stories, in sharing their grief and fear” (p 187).

As the reader approaches the end of this journey, they discover the crux of it all: love. Not the emotion, idolized by our western culture, but the action; the love of which the Greeks spoke using the word *αγάπη* (*agape*). While others have applied this lesson to leadership in other settings,¹ the deep, selfless, soul-felt concern for others is the very foundation of good medical care—an important reminder in our increasingly technophilic profession.

Attending Others is a personal account of the author’s professional development as a physician, and is relevant to other health care professionals and even the general public. Readers will gain insight into themselves, as Dr Volck’s experiences trigger personal recollection and

reflections. Reading this volume has the potential to make one a better person.

To paraphrase Richard Selzer: Why do physicians write? The desire to be a *healer*.² Dr Volck demonstrates again the sacred role in healing that is held by the physician-writer.

Finally, and worth noting, Dr Volck ultimately realized his “Plan A” of graduate training in literature: earning an MFA in writing nearly a quarter of a century after receiving his MD.

doi: 10.22454/FamMed.2018.728977

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1. Hunter JC. *The Servant*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing; 1998.
2. Selzer R. *Mortal Lessons*. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1976.

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