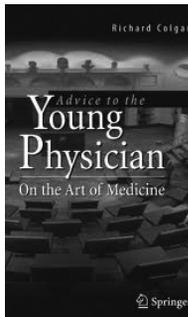


BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Advice to the Young Physician: on the Art of Medicine

Richard Colgan

New York, Springer, 2009, 145 pp., \$34.95, paperback.



Somewhere between history and evidence-based medicine sits the tradition that makes being a physician a true profession. Richard Colgan, MD, begins to explore this frontier in *Advice to the Young Physician: on the Art of Medicine*. In this brief, highly readable book, he abstracts from history, mentors, and personal experience

what it means to be a physician who takes care of people. Along the way he provides lists of suggested further readings and references. On reading *Advice to the Young Physician*, one leaves wanting a little bit more, happy to be a caring physician, and overwhelmed by the extensive future reading list.

Dr Colgan splits his book into two parts. The first is a four-chapter chronological summation of 12 historical physicians, personal mentors, or role models. These key players are described for their contributions to what makes a great physician. The character list ranges from the obvious like Hippocrates, Maimonides, Osler, and Farmer to the more provincial, including the Babylonian Hammurabi, the Persian Rhaze, Harvard's Peabody, and Maryland's Woodward. Dr Colgan introduces you to them three at a time, provides a journal-like abstract for each chapter, and closes the chapter with a reference list and suggested reading list. In about 70 pages, we are exposed to two and a half millennia of great physicians.

In the second half of the book, Dr Colgan switches into explicit advice mode. While the structure of each chapter does not really change (introductory abstract, brief narrative, and closure with a reference list and future reading list), the key players become Dr Colgan's personal experiences in practice, his research interests, and his beliefs. The intended reader, a young physician, is introduced to the

second half with "Survival Tips" and "Civility." This probably says more about the modern challenges of our profession rather than the core skills of the healer. Perhaps we have lost some of the historic dignity in our profession when Dr Colgan accurately prioritizes civility and survival. In this section, the young physician is given an excellent glimpse into Dr Colgan's personal take on being a physician. The not-so-young physician, where I find myself more likely to belong, is given something greater: a reassuring body of "evidence" that being a physician is still more than billing codes, HEDIS measures, and *P* values. One begins to conclude with Dr Colgan that being a physician is more than being statistically successful in the health care industry; it continues to be about being a healer.

As the text progresses like a biopic of medicine, the experienced reader finds Dr Colgan's style familiar to the genre of Gladwell, a "story, an idea-driven narrative that's focused on the everyday and combines research with material that's more personal, social, and historical." In the end, the more experienced physicians start to hear their own voice in the text and find their own practice experiences, personal role models, and core beliefs in the profession within. For this reader, the description of Ted Woodward served as a reminder of the long, generous tradition of apprenticeship to mentors who can trace their lineage to their original disciples.

In an era of further automation, standardization, and quantification of our industry, it is nice to know that there is a society of physician healers. Dr Colgan brings this forward to share with others both experienced and prospective. It serves as an invitation to be something different, to join the society of healers. Dr Colgan's *Advice to the Young Physician: on the Art of Medicine* is likely the book all good teaching physicians have in them but have not accepted the challenge to write and all prospective healers are looking to read.

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