

Secrets from the black bag

By Susan Woldenberg Butler

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To the Editor: The individual stories are based on interviews conducted with general practitioners from across the globe over a period of ten years. The author has humorous pseudonyms for the narrators and uses fiction to enhance the impact of the stories. Each chapter is cleverly spun around a central character who is a doctor working in a remote area and describes an interaction with a patient/s, each telling a unique story. The chapters too, have humorous names, from "Eggs and bacon in Alice Springs" to "Make my wife pregnant, doctor".

The book describes the peculiarities of practice in a small industrial town in England ("The trials of Rosie B") where Rosie, who was fifteen years old, denied that she was pregnant and hid her baby under the wardrobe when the doctor was called! On the other hand, in "Eggs and Bacon in Alice Springs", a doctor working in a remote northern part of Australia with an aboriginal community, reflects on the high prevalence of scabies, tuberculosis and otitis media in children. He bemoans the inadequate health infrastructure, describes the frustration of efforts in saving children's lives only for them to return with similar problems not long afterwards and questions his relevance in such a situation.

The special relationship between doctor and patient is well-illustrated. The doctor is shown to be "human" when he succumbs to anger while interacting with challenging patients and wrestles with cultural issues in some of the consultations. It also illustrates how doctors become part of the communities in which they work, such as a doctor's friendship with Aboriginal Australians, Wally and Dulcie and how they hunt

for wild honey (cooba) and kill a porcupine to eat. He is also knowledgeable about the local superstitions and mythology, like the kadaitcha man.

There is also a chapter on the challenges of practising medicine in Africa where patients would walk into your home looking for the doctor, who is never off duty unless s/he leaves town!

Two extremes of patients are also described from the doctor-bashing kind who abuse the National Health System and demand immediate and repeated home visits in the UK to the New Zealand Farmer, "Wiley Riley" who plays down the severity of his wife's condition when he requests a home visit. However, because this patient had rarely asked for home visits in the past, the doctor's instinct tells him to go immediately and he finds the wife miscarrying at home.

There is also a moving chapter which describes the pain that doctors go through when children die – from a child who was not cared for properly by neglectful parents and succumbed from pneumonia, lying on the floor all alone in front of the fireplace, to one who had brain cancer, was cared for lovingly by his family and was surrounded by loving parents and two sisters when he died in his own bed at home.

This book is a fun, easy read which most doctors and their spouses would relate to quite easily and you will find yourself laughing out loud as a story reminds you of a similar interaction you have had with a patient.

About the author

The author was born in Louisiana, USA and now lives in rural Tasmania with her husband. She has previously published short stories and non-fiction. This is her first fiction work.

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Academy News

SAAFP/PC Mini-Congress: Saturday 9 May 2009

The annual Mini-Congress of the SAAFP/PC is traditionally held on the second Saturday in May. There were 4 concurrent workshops after each plenary. The congress was very well attended with 148 delegates and 21 sponsors.

The first plenary session was on "HIV Management for GPs" and we invited Dr Steve Andrews who is very passionate about his HIV management, teaching and research. He started by giving criteria when to start medication and illustrated with cases from his practice. He also discussed contraceptive issues and choosing which ARVs in patients with multiple organ system problems, especially cardiovascular disease, as HIV itself affects the lipid profile. HIV itself causes an increase in lipids and there is an increased risk of myocardial infarction. Some ARVs causes an increase in insulin resistance. He highlighted the conflicting guidelines.

The second plenary was on 'Ethical Choices' in Primary Care. Prof Keymanthri Moodley of the Bioethics Unit – Tygerberg Division was the first speaker. She said that respect for patient autonomy creates the following obligations:

- Informed consent
- Confidentiality and privacy
- Communication
- Truth-telling
- Communication

She showed an extract from *Nights in Rodanthe* about a doctor, played by Richard Gere, who loses a patient and how he reacts. She further spoke on controversial issues in "Choices in Obstetrics and Gynaecology", especially:

- Contraception including sterilisation
- Mode of delivery
- TOP
- Feticide

Sharon King, a Paediatrician discussed the Ethics of Choice with respect to children. This was a highly interactive and controversial session. She stated:

- No parent, guardian or caregiver may refuse to assist a child or withhold consent because of religious or other beliefs, unless they can show that there is a medically accepted alternative choice to the medical treatment or surgical operation concerned

The Western Cape Branch herewith also wishes to thank Charmalin Simpson for organising the congress and for all the sponsors for their support.

Dr Saville Furman

Convener

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Drs Anil Ramjee, Steve Andrews and Strini Govender



Norwegian delegate, Dr Morris Montanus and myself (class of '73)



Prof Keymanthri, myself and Dr Sharon King