Commentary

Three Books

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Time to curl up before the fire with a good book? Here are three to choose from. All deal with matters close to the heart, the peace of mind and the pocketbook of practicing physicians.

The first, *The Silent World of Doctor and Patient,*[1] is written by a professor of law and psychoanalysis at Yale. The author, Jay Katz, contends that in interaction with our patients we should learn that "it is possible to sit down and reason together about the most personal anxieties and fears that illness and its treatment engenders." What the professor is telling us is that we should be doing a better job of providing our patients with "informed consent."

Many would protest that Katz has produced this book from within the ivy-covered walls of academia and that most every physician is already struggling valiantly to provide information and to obtain proper consent, while knowing that all too often our efforts are not wanted, or needed, or comprehended.

You may wonder how an author can use 238 pages to contemplate the vagaries of informed consent. But Katz manages it by using flashbacks into the history of medicine and by the generous use of quotations, ranging from Shakespeare to Menninger. To this he adds a tentative psychiatric exploration of the brain of the practicing physician.

This is a special kind of a book—but one I found easy to set aside.

The second book for your evening before the fire is in direct contrast to the scholarly dissertations between the covers of *The Silent World of Doctor and Patient.* Arthur Hailey's novel *Strong Medicine*[2] is filled with lively conversation and page after page of easy reading. In this story the author has woven a tale of intrigue centering around the pharmaceutical industry and its frantic efforts to bring new drugs to the marketplace.

This is the story of a female "detail man" who rose quickly through the ranks to become the top executive in her company. At her side and working with her is her doctor-husband. The book has courtroom drama, Senate hearings, angry struggles with the FDA and enough sex to qualify it for a movie. Remembering his success with *Airport,* Hailey may well have been casting a side-long glance at Hollywood.

You will give credit to the author for his careful research. He made certain that his information was accurate. He did his homework. You will be impressed by his knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes in the pharmaceutical industry, as well as what goes on when medical reps make their visits to doctors' offices.

All in all, this is good reading; fun to pick up as you wait for sleep.

The third book, *Defendant—A Psychiatrist on Trial for Medical Malpractice,*[3] is a winner. Here is the story of five long years of anguish suffered by Sara Charles, accused of malpractice through negligence. A distraught young woman, a patient of Dr Charles, had hurled herself from the roof of her apartment house, miraculously surviving but destined to spend her life in a wheelchair. The doctor is the "defendant" simply because she did not prevent this suicidal attempt.

This is an engrossing story, with sharp-witted and sharp-tongued lawyers taking turns jousting with each other—then turning to snipe at witnesses, or slyly coaxing them to make costly mistakes. The doctor's confidential records are brought into court, along with a heartrending videotape showing the plaintiff dragging her broken body through a typical painful day.

As we read this book, we are reminded of the torment that could be ours through some unforeseeable mishap or oversight.

Defendant is a true story of a dramatic courtroom episode of malpractice litigation. Underlying this gripping legal drama is a scary message: The growing wave of malpractice suits is threatening the very quality of health care in America.

For physicians this book will serve as excellent continuing medical education. It should be required reading for both defendant and plaintiff attorneys. Most of all, it should be read by the public—our patients—so that they might better understand how the skyrocketing costs of liability insurance, coupled with the tremendous professional and personal burden placed on the shoulders of practicing physicians, is affecting the cost and the availability of health care.

You'll find it hard to lay this one down.

REFERENCES

1. Katz J: The Silent World of the Doctor and Patient. New York, Free Press, 1984
2. Hailey A: Strong Medicine. Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1984
3. Charles SC, Kennedy E: Defendant—A Psychiatrist on Trial for Medical Malpractice. New York, Free Press, 1985

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