

My Medicine, My body: The Serious Physician becomes a Serious Patient

By Basil Porter (Author), Daniella Maor (Ed).

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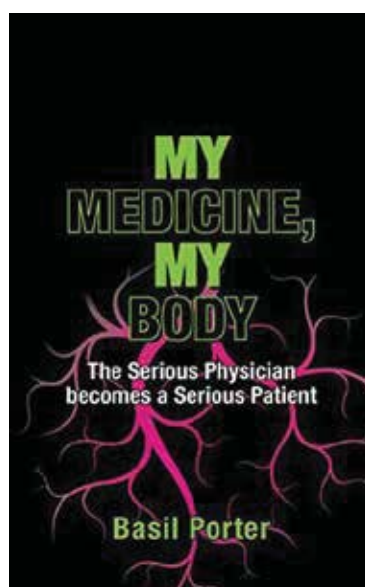
This book rests comfortably within the hoary tradition of the doctor-patient telling his/her story in the hope that someone out there is listening. Apparently, these tales are quite popular; witness the number that appear in *Piece of my Mind* [1] or *On Being a Doctor* [2], among many others.

But speaking of being a patient, does this one ever have an impressive list of maladies from which he has suffered over a lifetime: starting as a child with appendicitis and an anesthetic complication, then a serious case of pustular acne leading to scarring, followed by a bout of hepatitis and then severe, incapacitating back pain. As if all this were not enough, next in line a car accident in the U.K. caused by looking right when he should have looked left. The following malady was a large parotid gland tumor; the bad news: increasingly obstructing the airway; the good: it was benign and subsequently successfully removed by a specialist in Boston, USA.

Next, believe it or not, was an actual train wreck with a near death experience, broken neck, prolonged rehabilitation followed by serious and unremitting neuropathic pain. The good news: with time, patience, modern medications, and experience, our good doctor-patient improved sufficiently to eventually return to playing his beloved viola.

And again, if all that were not enough (*dayenu!*) out of the blue, a diagnosis of chronic myelocytic leukemia. Once again, modern medicine comes to the rescue with lifesaving medications promising (as much as they can) a normal life expectancy along with a reasonable quality of life.

But what is the point of recounting this variegated *dolor medicalis*? Throughout the text, Prof. Porter, with a quiet and under-



stated humor reflecting in part his South African origins and upbringing, takes us through the lessons for patients, and more importantly in my view, for his fellow practitioners. To patients, the message is actually quite simple: medicine today, although it does not solve all of our problems (and as a geriatrician myself I should know), is truly miraculous.

Almost all of Prof. Porter's maladies, save acne (the importance of which to an adolescent I do not for a moment underestimate), could have killed him or left him in desperate straits had he not been able to benefit from the marvels of modern medicine. More than once the author mentions with profound gratitude that he had been born "just in time." And how!

But for us doctors, he has another lesson, equally if not even more important. It is not a new one, and although better taught today than it was 50 years ago, the simple

doctor-patient relationship and subsequent interactions are of paramount importance. These positive contacts cost the treating doctor almost nothing and are appreciated as priceless by almost all patients—whether they hold a medical degree themselves or not. Porter points out that a simple smile, a warm physical touch, the expression of a bit of empathy for him as a patient all did a world of good. And if we cannot always cure, can we just comfort a bit? Again, this is not new but Porter witnessed this clear need first hand, and all from the other end of the stethoscope.

My only criticism of the book would be that it does not really go deeply into the reasons for these ongoing lacunae. They are, of course, poor training, bad role modeling (or to put in differently, role modeling by bad doctors who are not necessarily bad people), pressure of time, the impossible challenge of achieving a proper life-work balance, and so forth. Need I say more?

But this criticism is niggling. We know what to do in medical schools, in residency training, and in our practices. As a catalyst, read Dr. Porter's book. You will enjoy it, and if, as a result, our profession begins to take more seriously the lessons from his difficult road, perhaps some of this doctor-patient's suffering will not have been in vain.

References

1. Kelley AS. An OB/GYN's personal story of pregnancy loss. *JAMA* 2017; 318 (13):1223-4.
2. Liu C. On being a doctor again. *Ann Int Med* 2014; 160 (4): 286-7.

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