

## BOOK REVIEW

### *How Doctors Think*

by Gerome Groopman, MD  
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 2007

According to a review in TIME magazine, this book should be read by “every physician who cares for patients, and every patient who wishes to get the best care.” This is a thought provoking book that points out that on average, a physician will interrupt a patient describing her symptoms within eighteen seconds. In that short time, many doctors decide on the likely diagnosis and best treatment.

This book delves into the common basis for incorrect diagnoses. For example, in a study of one hundred incorrect diagnoses, inadequate medical knowledge was the reason for error in only four cases. This is surprising and counter-intuitive. Findings based on autopsies show that 10-15 percent of all diagnoses are incorrect. Clinical intuition is a complex sense that becomes refined over years and years of practice, of listening to literally thousands of patients’ stories. Expertise is largely acquired not only by sustained practice but by receiving feedback that helps doctors understand their technical errors and misguided decisions. To become a stellar clinician, the journey has to start by acknowledging the errors, analysing them, and acting on them.

In this book you will read about ‘availability,’ ‘anchoring’ and ‘zebra retreats’ - common traps that can lead to incorrect diagnoses. The latter refers to the fact that once a particular diagnosis becomes fixed in a physician’s mind, despite incomplete evidence, the first doctor passes on his (incorrect) diagnosis to his peers and subordinates. A good suggestion from this book is that when a case first arrives, you should not hear anyone else’s diagnosis, begin by looking at the primary data.

This book warns about over reliance on MRIs—they find abnormalities in everybody. Trying to relate the abnormality to the pain can be the hard part. The MRI, a revered technology, can constrain a doctor’s thinking. When radiologists were asked “Is this film normal?” they disagreed among themselves 20 percent of the time. With so many excellent imaging techniques, doctors hardly examine patients or take detailed histories anymore.

The relationship between doctors and pharmaceutical companies gets a serious discussion in this book. Are pharmaceutical companies striving to change the way doctors think about health and disease? Should all men with low testosterone be on hormone therapy, for instance?

The current culture of medicine, especially in the West, fosters lucrative networks of referrals and procedures, but discourages critical examination of their value. Doctors also should not be paralysed by potential litigation. Without risking failure there is zero chance of success. Some good advice for the young doctor - always read the recent literature regarding your patient who has an unusual clinical case, a variation of a diagnosis. I encourage our local doctors in Apia to read this book. A copy is held on reserve at the Oceania University of Medicine Library at the Motootua campus.

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