

# BOOK REVIEWS

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## Physicians Are People, Too

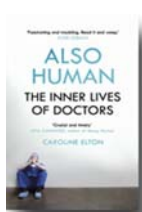
BY DAMON TWEEDY

### ALSO HUMAN: THE INNER LIVES OF DOCTORS

By Caroline Elton

New York (NY): Basic Books, 2018

336 pp., \$30.00



During high school and college, I viewed physicians through the idealized lens that we are often still seen through today. To my youthful eyes, doctors were smart, ambitious, and well paid (or soon to be), while serving an essential public good. Yes, they worked hard, but wouldn't most people happily trade places with them? Not until medical school did I begin to see the potential pitfalls of a doctor's life that many faced: periods of unrelenting fatigue, anxiety, self-doubt, and despair, and a gnawing sense that a medical career—or at least a particular specialty choice—was the wrong career path.

Recent years have brought increasing attention to these challenges, with articles in prominent medical journals and other physician forums detailing the spectrum of physician dissatisfaction, ranging from burnout through depression to—all too often—suicide. Periodically, these reports make their way into mainstream publications, typically with the implication that distressed doctors are bad for patients. What has been missing to date is a cohesive, in-depth exploration of the many facets that trigger and perpetuate these problems for physicians. Into this void comes *Also*

*Human: The Inner Lives of Doctors*, a new book by Caroline Elton that passionately advocates for paying greater attention to the unique emotional needs of physicians.

Elton is a vocational psychologist based in London. For the past twenty years she has worked directly with physicians—for the first decade, in hospitals as part of a program to make attending physicians better teachers and, since 2008, as director of a Careers Unit for all trainee (resident) doctors across London. As she writes in the book's introduction, this professional experience, coupled with her training as a psychologist rather than as a physician, makes her uniquely positioned to examine the shortcomings of the medical training process from an outsider's perspective. In contrast to the many non-fiction narratives written by physicians about their patients, "in this book," Elton writes, "the mirror is reversed: doctors ... come to see me, a psychologist, and I am writing about them."

In each chapter Elton uses the cases of doctors she has counseled as the framework to discuss a larger issue. She begins with the tough transition from medical school to internship, illustrating how poorly medical school often prepares students for the onslaught of responsibility as an intern and how inadequately junior doctors are supported in this new role. She goes on to critique the residency selection process itself, through which, in the UK, applicants can be assigned a position not of their choosing. All too often, the weaker applicants end up in places far from their support networks, which leads to what Elton describes as the educational variant of the "inverse care law": Those who need the most help end up receiving the least. She contrasts the experience in the UK and US with that in New Zealand, where a "trainee year" precedes the first year of being a physician. There, surveys suggest that students feel more prepared to be a doctor and report signifi-

cantly fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, or burnout.

Another chapter explores how medical students and young doctors choose a specialty. Elton identifies three major elements—personal experience, medical role models, and work-life balance—that guide this decision. This process can be seamless for some, but for others, these competing values can be in conflict and cause distress. Elton offers the example of students who become oncologists because of close relatives with cancer and those who become psychiatrists because of a personal history of mental illness. In some situations the match works well, while in others it does not. About a quarter of physicians are unhappy with their specialty choice, she notes. In a later chapter she discusses the tension and shame that can result when a person is deciding whether to leave medicine altogether.

Perhaps the most insightful chapter examines when doctors become patients. Elton writes: "The culture within medicine often positions patient and doctor as mutually exclusive categories. You can be one or the other—but never both together." Among the many examples she offers, the one that stands out is the case of an obstetrician trainee struggling with infertility and being harshly unsupported by her supervisors, despite the fact that three of those doctors had undergone in vitro fertilization treatments themselves. Her story and those of others poignantly display medicine's frequent inability to synthesize the identities of "doctor" and "patient" in the same person.

Improving the emotional well-being of doctors requires interventions that address the interplay between individual doctors, the organizations in which they work, and the broader culture of medicine, Elton argues. She offers "flickers of hope" in her survey of examples in which institutions across the globe are attempting to address one or more of these problems. Ultimately,

though, she feels that a “psycholectomy” has been performed on the profession: “Doctors’ psychological needs are denied, ignored, not thought about. Unmet.”

A recent experience I witnessed gives a glimpse of what a better future might look like. A new medical resident in a multispecialty clinic found himself overwhelmed by the various tasks in front of him. He started to tear up. I watched in

surprise and delight as, instead of telling him to “suck it up” or “carry on,” his two primary care supervisors explained that they had both been through the same thing, and that it was normal for him to feel this way. The resident thanked them, quickly bounced back, and did well the rest of the rotation. Maybe this exchange indicates that a culture change (albeit a slow one) is occurring within medicine. Perhaps in fifty years we will

look back on certain aspects of our current medical culture with disbelief. One can hope. ■

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