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Inscribed Bodies: Health Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse

by Anna Luise Kirkengen, MD, PhD

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD

Although sexual abuse is common in the lives of many children^a and even decades later continues to show confusing sequelae in medical practice, childhood sexual abuse is comfortably protected by social taboo. The subject is therefore rarely acknowledged, much less included in our “review of systems.” In this book, however, we are shown the profoundly destructive effects of familiarly and socially imposed secrecy and of being unable to speak openly, even to physicians, about childhood sexual abuse. Indeed, according to the author, “Violated humans are *made sick by the silence* and are sacrificed to the silence ... which societies still resist becoming knowledgeable of and reflect[ing] upon.” (page 390). *Inscribed Bodies* is thus a book about things we wish not to know. This book, however, has great value which far exceeds its (expensive) price. Such a profound and insightful work as *Inscribed Bodies* comes into print only once every decade or two.

The author, Anna Luise Kirkengen, is a German physician in general practice in Oslo, Norway. She describes her book as an examination of how patients subjected to childhood sexual abuse had their integrity as humans violated by this abuse. After exploring the adverse health effects of sexual violation, Dr Kirkengen discusses the biomedical intervention necessitated by this sexual violation. Unfortunately, this is not a book about someone else’s subspecialty.

Based on tape-recorded interviews with ordinary patients seen by Dr Kirkengen, the book provides readers with actual quotes from these conversations as well as detailed analyses of them. The cases involve a wide range of clinical presentations, including depression, suicidality, somatization disorders, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue. Of course, most patients come into

the office holding the necessary entry ticket of physical symptoms, but this visit is really a disguised adaptive strategy for seeking help (page 20).

The book is divided into three major sections:

- Approaching life-world experiences;
- Unfolding the impact of sexual violation; and
- Exploring the medical making of patients.

A short final section, *Impressions*, consists of a series of the author’s reflections expressed in the form of poetry.

Inscribed Bodies deserves attention as the work of an unusually observant and reflective physician who sees with frightening clarity and writes with ease and elegance. *Inscribed Bodies* will be of great interest to colleagues who feel an obligation to pursue self-development, both professional and personal. The book will be appreciated by those who are troubled by the disparity between the formal biomedical diagnoses we learned so proudly and the actual human problems that patients bring to us in our offices. The book will help us to accept the high level of responsibility accorded physicians and to better understand the human condition as we participate in the great dramatic moments of other people’s lives. ♦

^a A careful analysis of 18,000 middle-aged Kaiser Foundation Health Plan members in San Diego showed that the prevalence of self-acknowledged contact sexual abuse in childhood was 22%. The relation of this childhood abuse to adult health status was profound.¹

Reference

1. Felitti VJ. The relationship between adverse childhood experiences and adult health: turning gold into lead. *Perm J* 2002 Winter;6(1):44-7.

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