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A Life in Medicine: A Literary Anthology

By Robert Coles, MD, and Randy Testa, Editors

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD

Practicing medicine can be—and often is—an extraordinary experience because of the insight given us into other lives and because of its intensity, intellectual stimulation, and social importance. Nonetheless, we easily lose sight of this aspect of our profession when we are immersed in the pressures of everyday matters. Fortunately, books like *A Life in Medicine* sometimes come along to remind and reinspire us.

A Life in Medicine is an anthology of stories, poems, and extracts of books that help us to achieve a deeper understanding of what we do as medical doctors. Wonderful reading in itself, the book is also a meaningful introduction to the works of writers ranging from Anton Chekhov and Lewis Thomas to obscure physician-authors who have a superb talent for describing what they see and experience in medical practice.

Robert Coles is an unusual physician: He is a family friend of Ezra Pound and a medical student protégé of William Carlos Williams. He is a psychiatrist-sociologist who, as a teacher of literature at Harvard University, helps us understand our lives and what we do in medical practice, where we have the privilege of participating in the great dramatic moments of our patients' lives. The feel of *A Life in Medicine* is at times reminiscent of Williams' *Doctor Stories*,¹ and the book's concept is similar to that of Norman Cousins' *The Physician in Literature*.² Perhaps these similarities should come as no surprise, because, as stated in the *Preface*, "The work of medicine in considerable part rests on the doctor's ability to listen to the stories that patients tell; to make sense of these often chaotic narratives of illness ... and to understand what these narratives mean at multiple (and sometimes contradictory) levels"³

This book is a valuable resource for physicians who wish to explore the meaning of their professional

lives. The stories and poems selected are wonderful, sad, insightful, and occasionally funny. Not only can they help us see our work through the eyes of patients and families but also through our own eyes when, as sometimes happens, we have become sufficiently distracted by work and responsibility to no longer fully appreciate both what we do and our unusual relationship with others. Ours is a profession that fosters loneliness, and an early article by Coles describes this risk of being a physician: "In search for closeness he craves knowledge; and in search of knowledge he finds psychology. Psychology becomes a substitute for love, for intimacy"^{3:309} David Loxtercamp, a family doctor in Maine, closes the anthology with a piece containing these lines: "For the battle-worn physician, our Waterloo waits in the stack of messages at the end of the day We recognize it in unwritten cards of condolence, our cowardice to confront addiction or abuse, the contempt we feel for self-destructive patients, and the encounters we crimp with a blood test or prescription when another five minutes with the doctor would do. How we respond to patients—in mood and action—reflects the core of the physician we are striving to become."^{3:319} Like Coles' earlier book, *The Call of Stories*,⁴ this one reminds us, amid all the other things we seek to get, to get understanding. ♦

References

1. Williams WC. The doctor stories. Robert Coles, editor. New York: New Directions; 1984.
2. Cousins N, editor. The physician in literature. Philadelphia: Saunders Press; 1982.
3. Coles R, Testa R, O'Donnell J, Armstrong P, Anderson MB, editors. A life in medicine: a literary anthology. New York: New Press; 2002.
4. Coles R. The call of stories: teaching and the moral imagination. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 1989.

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