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Doctors' Stories *The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* by Kathryn Montgomery Hunter

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD, FACP

Many physicians will find that this impressive book reveals what we do in clinical practice in an unexpectedly refreshing way. The view is as seen through the eyes of a learned woman, an English professor, who took it upon herself to spend a number of years with physicians and medical students in order to study the use of narrative in medicine. Her book is practical, erudite, interesting, and philosophical in the best of ways.

The author's observations on the role of narrative in medicine are helpful; her comments on the role of science in medicine are insightful, as are her observations on the nature of what we accept as evidence, and how we deal with uncertainty. She explores the limits of "evidence-based" and how we came to "present" patients in the stereotyped way we do. "Medicine is not a science. Instead, it is a rational, science-using, inter-level, interpretative activity undertaken for the care of a sick person."^{1-p25}

Overall, this is a book about what we do, how we do it, and why we do it that way. It is dedicated to thinking about the implications of our routine processes, processes that are so ingrained that it is hard to imagine there might be other ways of carrying them out. It is quite helpful to see all this through the eyes of such an intelligent and attentive observer. That view helps us better understand what we do and how others see it. It also exposes problems, and sometimes the basis for failures.

Two quotes exemplify the nature of this book. The first is LJ Henderson's (of Henderson-Hasselbach Equation fame) comment in an article in *Transaction of the Association of American Physicians* (1936) titled, "The Practice of Medicine as Applied Sociology." "In an interview listen, first, for what the patient wants to tell, secondly, for implications of what he does not want to tell, thirdly, for implications of what he cannot tell ... I suggest that it is impossible to understand any man as a person without knowledge of his environment and especially of what he thinks and feels it is, which may be a very different thing."^{1-p140}

The second quote is from Leon Kass, physician, biochemist, ethicist, and Henry Luce Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago: "Medicine ... is a fertile ground for understanding 'the moral relation between knowledge or expertise and the concerns of life.'"^{1-p149} Indeed, it has often seemed that the great gift of medical practice is to allow us participation in the great dramatic moments of other people's lives, the better to understand our own, and the world.

For those wishing a thoughtful exploration of the nature of what we do, technically and humanistically, this is a book to be welcomed. ♦

Reference

1. Hunter KM. *Doctors' stories: The narrative structure of medical knowledge*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 1991.

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The Birth of Ideas

A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas—a place where history comes to life.

— Norman Cousins, 1915-1990, American editor and author.