

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

*This new section summarises reviews of books on ethics and the practice of medicine.*

**Madhouse: a tragic tale of megalomania and modern medicine.** Andrew Scull. Yale University Press, Princeton Pp 349 2005. \$37.50 (cloth) ISBN: 0-300-10729-3  
Reviewed by Warne G, in *CMAJ* 2006; 174: 68.

Dr Warne, a psychiatrist, says that his profession, keen to find a physical cause for psychiatric illnesses, adopts some bizarre theories. He describes the tale of Dr Cotton who, convinced that hidden foci of infection were the cause of mental illness, removed every potential site of infection in his patients.

**Broken limbs, broken lives: ethnography of a hospital ward in Bangladesh** Shahaduz Zaman. Transaction Publishers, Pp 252, 2005. US\$49.95. ISBN 9-055-89229-7.  
Reviewed by Katikireddi V, in *Lancet* 2005; 366:1766.

The author of this engaging book paints a vivid picture of the many differences and surprising similarities between medical care in the developed and developing world. As a Bangladeshi public-health doctor and anthropologist, Zaman looks at the experiences of all the people involved in this hospital—the patients, doctors, nurses, relatives, and auxiliary staff. What Zaman shows us is that while the fundamentals of medical science are similar the world over, the practice is not.

**Life and death in intensive care.** Joan Cassell. Temple University Press, Pp 233, 2005. US\$22.95 ISBN 1-59213-336-3.  
Reviewed by Raizman N, in *Lancet* 2005; 366: 1998

Cassell, an anthropologist, describes the “interplay between intensivists, surgeons, nurses, and administrators in three surgical intensive-care units” and compares the US medical scene with New Zealand, “illuminating some of medicine’s most difficult issues”.

**American bioethics: crossing human rights and health law boundaries**  
George J Annas. Oxford University Press, New York, 244 pp, 2005 \$35. ISBN 0-19-516949-2.  
Reviewed by Caplan AL, in *N Eng J Med* 2005; 353:2724-2725.

The author argues that only “by seeking to adopt a human-rights framework” bioethics can secure justice — both for those whose needs for basic health care are unmet and for those for whom hard choices must be made about when and how to use expensive medical technologies.

**Ending life: ethics and the way we die.** Margaret Pabst Battin. Oxford University Press, New York, 344 pp, 2005. \$74 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-19-514026-5 (cloth); 0-19-514027-3 (paper).

Reviewed by Meier DE, in *N Eng J Med* 2005; 353:2726

The debate about death — whether how we die is something we can control by exercising our autonomy or whether death is something that happens to us that we must simply accept — are presented in this book with clarity and passion.

**Lesser harms: the morality of risk in medical research.** (Morality and Society Series.) Sydney A. Halpern. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 232 pp. 2004. \$37.50. ISBN 0-226-31451-0.

Reviewed by Baker JP, in *N Eng J Med* 2005; 353:2725-2726

Halpern describes the logic of lesser harm prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century by which no medical intervention was considered ethical unless it posed less risk to the subject than the risk posed by the corresponding disease itself. However, since the Second World War a utilitarian ethos has prevailed which has subordinated individual rights to the good of society. He suggests that regulations will be most effective if they build on the traditions of medical investigators.

**The great mortality: an intimate history of the Black Death, the most devastating plague of all time.** John Kelly. HarperCollins, New York, 364 pp. 2005. \$25.95. ISBN 0-06-000692-7.

Reviewed by Dattwyler RJ, in *N Eng J Med* 2005; 353:1982-1983.

The author describes how the plague spread from central Asia to Europe in the fourteenth century and in less than five years killed one third of the population of Europe, producing profound changes in European society. The well-written book also draws parallels with the current age and suggests how one can plan to cope with such a “weapon of mass destruction”.

**The year of magical thinking.** Joan Didion. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 227 pp, 2005. \$23.95. ISBN 1-4000-4314-X.

Reviewed by Christopoulos KA, in *N Eng J Med* 2005; 353: 2727.

Noted essayist Joan Didion skilfully dissects her struggle with the denial, pain, and rage that followed the sudden death of her husband of nearly 40 years, writer John Gregory Dunne, and the protracted illness of their daughter, Quintana Roo. She kept notes during her vigil in the hospital describing the comments of the medical staff. The book does not vilify the medical profession but acknowledges the range of feeling that exists in these complicated circumstances. This book is a masterly attempt to bear witness to the experience. It reminds us, as physicians, that what we do can make it easier or harder for those who lose loved ones.