

day, his family is glad, though the psychiatrist says, "Just pray that he is not alive. You have no idea what he must be going through without his lithium." Sukant Deepak's is a short black piece, barely ten pages, but runs the gamut of mental illness – the crazed suffering of Swadesh Deepak, the attempts at treatment, the caregivers' patience running thin, and finally, the unimaginable suffering of Swadesh on the loose. I read this piece again and again and every time, was shocked by the pain it conveyed under the near-bland prose.

The next piece, "My mother, the professor", is written under a pseudonym – Leela Chakravorthy, by a woman who could not bear to put her name to the memoir of a girl raised by a tortured mother who was treated for her illness only at the late age of 67. This in a highly educated family where the woman of the house is a professor. Would a fracture of say, the wrist been untreated for this long period? This again, is a story told tautly – a story of great pain and suffering that stretches into Leela's own life, her life with her husband and her daughter. Leela wonders all the while if not forgetting also means not forgiving.

Parvana Boga Noorani's "You didn't know her when she was normal" is the third hard-hitting piece – this time of a schizophrenic(?) mother who loves her children, but also holds a sharp knife to her daughter's throat threatening to kill her. The child that is Parvana is so vexed by her mother that she tells her father, "Why don't you divorce her?" Indian daughters only too often see Jekyll and Hyde in their "normal" mothers, often loving, sometimes very cruel and restricting. Mothers

often are cruel to socialise their daughters into survival in Indian society. How much more traumatic is the experience with a sick mother.

"My mother's breast" by Amandeep Sandhu struck me more for the son's role as the extraordinary caregiver of his mother rather than of the illness. Patricia Mukhim in "Daniella" learns that empathy is what matters most to a person with depression, not being given advice. This, of course, is easier to hear than put into practice as she discovers when faced with her bipolar daughter Daniella.

"Abhimanyu, our son", is a very short piece – the father talking of the experience with their autistic son. Glossing over the heartaches makes it easier for the reader but robs the piece of its nuances. "Roger, over and out" – is the long piece about a brief romance with a schizophrenic. Beautifully written, evocative certainly, but would have been more in place in a book of short stories? Though, who are we to say that every piece should match the intensity of Deepak and Chakravorthy?

What does one gain by this painful recounting? Pinto deals with this upfront in his introduction – his answer would be different every day, he says. The only thing he is sure of is that it doesn't get easier or more bearable by not talking about it.

Speaking Tiger has done the Indian reader a disservice by making this valuable book a hardcover and pricing it at Rs 400. This is a book everyone should be able to buy and read.

Understanding scientific surgery

GEORGE THOMAS

Ian Harris. *Surgery, the ultimate placebo*. Coogee, NSW: New South Publishing, 2016, 240 pp, Kindle edition, INR 889, ISBN-10:1742234577.

The tremendous and unquestioning regard, in which modern medicine has been placed, has been tempered somewhat by the realisation that every technological advance does not necessarily mean an improvement in disease outcomes. Better understanding of scientific methodology has led to the development of evidence-based medicine and evidence-informed healthcare.

In this book, Dr Ian Harris, a practising orthopaedic surgeon in Australia, examines the discipline of surgery with a sharp eye. His basic contention is that many surgical procedures do not

have a sound basis. He makes a compelling case for the use of the methodology now available to us to put to test surgical procedures with a view to eliminating those which are not useful and which are being practised today merely because they have the sanctity of age.

He begins by emphasising the difference between a placebo and the placebo effect. A placebo, by definition, has no therapeutic effect. It is well known, however, that patients (and doctors!) may perceive an effect that is not actually there. The perception of an effect beyond that of any specific effect is defined as the placebo effect. Dr Harris emphasises that the benefit seen is not due to the placebo, which, by definition, has no effect.

The obvious question is, is that a bad thing? Surely anything which makes a patient feel better should be good, whether it is real or not.

In the chapters that follow, Dr Harris gives several reasons why the placebo effect is not a good idea. He argues strongly

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for the practice of medicine based on science. The three main objections that he explains are: first, it is not truthful, therefore not scientific, and puts the practitioner in the same league as non-science-based medicine. The second objection is the cost, both the direct financial cost, and the opportunity cost of paying for something not truly effective when the money could be better spent on proven effective therapy, or other socially useful expenditure. The third objection is the possibility of harm, because research shows that, globally, harmful outcomes complicate 3% to 16% of all inpatient surgical procedures.

It is therefore essential that all surgical procedures must be proved to be effective. The problem is that this proof is not always easy to come by. Dr Harris makes a passionate plea to use the methods of science to validate all medical advice.

A large part of the book is devoted to examining what can be considered evidence, how evidence is developed and the need for evidence-based medicine. The language is clear and the explanations succinct. This is an important part of the book, because the methodology of scientific evidence has not been routinely taught in medical colleges till recently. It is my impression that a large number of medical practitioners worldwide are not familiar with rigorous scientific methodology. Perhaps this is true of researchers as well, considering the large number of papers of extremely dubious scientific methodology, which are being published in journals.

Dr Harris gives a number of examples of surgical procedures, across various surgical disciplines, for which there is no clear evidence of benefit. Some of these are: fusion surgery for

back pain, surgery for multiple sclerosis, knee arthroscopy for arthritis, and coronary stenting. He emphasises that these procedures be tested in large trials so as to either prove or disprove their utility.

It may appear intuitive that if many doctors, all of whom have spent years studying, recommend a procedure, then it must be right. In a chapter titled "Why do we still do it?" Dr Harris suggests some of the reasons why surgeons continue to do procedures that have no clear evidence, and also, importantly, why patients accept these procedures.

The book ends with suggestions for change. Dr Harris urges patients to ask questions to their doctors. He also asks the general public to demand research in areas which they see as important. For doctors, his advice is to learn how science is done and the principles of critically appraising the available evidence, to participate in generating high-quality evidence, and to keep away from financial incentives in decision-making. There are suggestions for researchers, research funders, and health insurers.

This is an important book. It is written in a clear and readable style. It describes many statistical concepts and their importance with clear examples. These statistical concepts, so important in understanding research methodology and what scientific evidence really is, are the bugbear of most medical practitioners.

The main message of the book is a call for ensuring that all surgical procedures, and by extension, all medical advice, is based on a foundation of scientific evidence.

Voices of dissenting doctors

SUNIL K PANDYA

Arun Gadre, Abhay Shukla. *Dissenting diagnosis. Voices of conscience from the medical profession*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Random House India. 2016. Paperback. 190 pages. ISBN 9788184007015. INR 399.00.

In his foreword, Mr Keshav Desiraju describes this book as remarkable, on the basis of the fact that the authors have interviewed 78 physicians, recorded their thoughts about their profession, and got them to describe their cynicism and

the bad faith prevailing among doctors. He concludes that all doctors, those influencing policies on health and everyone interested in the future of public health in India must read this book.

Mr Desiraju is an acclaimed and respected officer of the Indian Administrative Service. His efforts to improve the functioning of the Medical Council of India were frustrated by the order summarily transferring him from the post of Secretary in the Union Ministry of Health in February 2014 – a post which he held for less than a year. He has since retired, and lives in Chennai.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, the Indian circle of the worldwide People's Health Movement, was founded in 2001. It had publicly protested against Mr Desiraju's transfer in 2014, but to no avail. Dr Abhay Shukla is one of the national conveners of the Abhiyan (campaign). He studied Community Medicine at

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