

## After Harm: Medical Error and the Ethics of Forgiveness

A book review by Anne-Marie Brown RN BScN MN student

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The preface of this thoughtful book about medical error grounds the reader early on by referencing the Institute of Medicine's report in 1999 *To Err is Human*. The author implies the report served as a catalyst for her work, not because of the shocking statistics it included about the rates of medical error but instead what was missing from the discussion, forgiveness. The text focuses on "forgiveness" and the "aftermath of unintended harm in the context of health care" and in doing so tackles complicated concepts including disclosure, apology, and repentance.

The author is explicit early on that her exploration of medical error and forgiveness uses the "lens of religious studies". Although this lens has the potential to create challenge for those who are not scholars of religion the references are woven eloquently and effectively in the arguments put forth in the text. Despite recognizing the importance of exploring these concepts with other health professionals "especially with reference to the culture of nursing" the text specifically focuses on physicians and their relationships with patients.

*After Harm: Medical Error and the Ethics of Forgiveness*, is based on the health and legal systems in the United States potentially limiting the generalizability of some of the examples to other countries. Despite the American references however, many of the points made regarding the approach of some health care professionals with patients and families when an error has occurred i.e. "abandonment, or stonewalling" are likely not specific to American health care providers and the lessons drawn from this discussion are arguably universal.

The organization of the book moves the reader from heart wrenching physician accounts of errors while effectively illuminating how physicians are taught to think and discuss medical errors to narratives from patients and their families. It is through these narratives that the reader begins to see more clearly the stark contrasts that may exist between the experiences of the healthcare professional following medical error versus those of patients and families.

The chapter on disclosure raises the fundamentally challenging issue of "truth telling". Do we always tell the truth because to lie is wrong? Is omitting information lying? Are there times when it isn't wrong to withhold the truth? The chapter uses Bonhoeffer's critique of Kant to illustrate the *reason* we tell the truth and clarify the assumption of some physicians that withholding the truth may not be morally wrong. The text asserts that avoiding disclosure of an error regardless of the motivation i.e. fear of liability or personal and professional consequences when a patient has been injured assists unacceptably in denying justice to the victim.

The distinctions made in the chapter on *Apology* between various approaches and intents when saying "I'm sorry" is complicated yet essential and concludes by arguing that apologizing to a patient after they have been harmed is always the right thing to do. Chapter six adds valuable

insights into the need to engage with patients and their families when errors have occurred to determine the most appropriate and meaningful way to compensate them. Again the examples are American in context but the premises of directly asking “what do you need” and working toward a fair and meaningful compensation are important globally.

The text in my view makes an important contribution to the understanding of the relationship between physician and patient in the face of medical error. The text takes the discourse surrounding the aftermath of these errors a step further by focusing on the path to open honest engagement as a method of reaching meaningful forgiveness by the patient toward healthcare professional and the healthcare professional to themselves. The author states she hopes non-physician health care professionals will find her work of use, to that end she has succeeded.