

Attending Children: A Doctor's Education

A book review by Salma Shivji

Author: Margaret E. Mohrmann, M.D.
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This “extraordinary book” as acclaimed by The New England Journal of Medicine is perfect for those people currently in or considering medicine as a career. By using a collection of stories from her career as a pediatrician, Dr. Mohrmann compels us to think of the humanity behind medicine. Starting from her early years as a resident all the way until her retirement from clinical practice, the audience shares in her growth as a physician. The stories, organized in three parts, remind the audience of the duty doctors have towards their patients and their families, but also of the limitations of the practice of medicine.

In Part 1, “Listening”, Dr. Mohrmann explains how she learned the importance of listening to the patients and families. In her years as a resident, she explains about the steep learning curve that molds medical students into real doctors. Although residents know all about diseases and the treatments, it is this period that teaches them about the multiplicity of a patient encounter.

The most poignant story of this book, and one that appears in the first section, is that of Mickey. She was a young girl who had acute myelogenous leukemia (AML). It is through her story that we learn how patients feel that the concept of “rounding” on a patient can be dehumanizing. We also follow Dr. Mohrmann through learning curves that defined her as a doctor, such as telling a patient a grim diagnosis and answering the difficult question of “am I going to die?”

In Part 2, “Accompanying”, we learn about Dr. Mohrmann’s lessons learned during her fellowship and first few years as an attending physician. In this part she highlights that in order to attend properly to patients, physicians must also be present during the patient’s difficult times and be there as a guide through their sickness. Even if the situation is dire, physicians need to be there to assist the family and patient in whichever way they can. Sometimes medicine is not about saving a patient, but rather about making them comfortable while respecting their wishes.

The last part, “Waiting” describes stories from Dr. Mohrmann's years as a primary care doctor. She describes these years as a time when she had to patiently wait for another patient encounter. Unlike the hospital experience, it is the patient who chooses whether or not to come in and see the doctor, to take their advice, to let them know their stories. Therefore, while caring for patients under those conditions, a doctor should feel privileged that they get glimpses into their patients lives, but also must realize that what they know about a patient may be very limited. Dr. Mohrmann warns that doctors cannot be presumptuous in their care.

The lessons that this book presents are universal for anyone in a health care field. The mistakes and successes of Dr. Mohrmann can be used to prepare oneself for some of the realities of patient encounters and to learn the real meaning of attending to patients. Because the advice the author presents in these stories is not usually taught in medical or other professional schools, this book is a real gem.