THE LEFT ATRIUM

Book review

Forging a physician

Call Me Doctor

Shane Neilson

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Call Me Doctor is a relevant read for young medical professionals, candidly describing personal challenges faced by the author, Shane Neilson, on the path to becoming a doctor. He frames his unique experiences with both emotion and sincerity; every reader can relate.

In the preface, Neilson intriguingly cautions that his book will ultimately outline what *not* to do. However, the first few chapters of *Call Me Doctor* are not particularly engaging. The early pages, which depict Neilson's medical school years, leave the casual reader wondering about the actual purpose of the book. Many chapters could be removed or rearranged without any substantial impact on the final message, as spelled out in the last segment. Here Neilson recommends to potential medical school applicants:

And don't even think about applying before you are twenty-five; I think it generally takes that long before we become able to fully comprehend another's plight, their bad decisions, their denial, their motivations, their hopelessness.

With this bold statement, *Call Me Doctor* offers readers a thought-provoking perspective, whether valid or not.

While stories are told in chronological order, there often exists no tangible link between chapters. For example, his first day in residency is followed immediately by his sudden recollection of a later rotation: sifting through human remains in a hangar following the

crash of Swissair Flight 111 in 1998. To make up for lapses in flow, his main messages are doled out frankly: "I've just learned I can't be perfect. It is hard to accept," he writes, describing his training in an emergency department. The anecdotes and stories by themselves are intrinsically interesting, keeping the reader engaged.

At times, Neilson's personal stories leave gaps. Describing his intense struggle with depression, he scarcely mentions the impact of his illness on his family. Details in the brisk narrative seem omitted, replaced by a simple and distant re-telling of a very private experience. Nonetheless, when it becomes difficult for readers to understand exactly what happened, Neilson's plainly stated final lessons ensure that his point has been made.

The author's description of his Newfoundland residency gives urban readers

an insightful glimpse into the challenges that physicians face in rural settings: unforgiving winter weather, language and cultural barriers, long distances. His accounts are occasionally humorous. He relates with much lightheartedness a story of a woman eating a forbidden cookie before a scheduled surgery. In another instance, he contemplates bringing his family to his placement in Labrador, so that he can invite a lonely local priest to his home for dinner. Neilson successfully juxtaposes a beautifully solemn explanation of this dinner plan with a contrasting humorous closing line:

When we arrive, the priest can drive us to our apartment, when it will be my turn to invite him for dinner, my turn to show him a family, for I feel guilty at glimpsing uninvited such a large crevasse in his life. Plus, I can't cook.

In learning about the author's experiences, the reader will make up his or her own mind regarding Neilson's opinions, and his final message. In unambiguous language, Neilson addresses our need to confront the uncertainty of medicine, reminding us to be grateful to have the privilege of bearing witness to the most dramatic moments of patients' lives. Overall, with such blunt and controversial messages, *Call Me Doctor* is a truly worthwhile read for any member of the general public interested in acquiring insight into the training of a physician. The book's assertions are particularly meaningful for medical school students and those thinking of applying to medical school.

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