BOOKS

The underbelly of the pharmaceutical industrial complex

White Coat Black Hat: Adventures on the Dark Side of Medicine

Carl Elliott

Beacon Press; 2010.

It's a rare academic who can take his chosen métier and bring it to the masses with verve, populating stories with characters of all sorts who are as interesting as they are insightful. Author Carl Elliott is such an academic. Besides being both a physician and a philosopher, he's a university professor who hangs his hat in the bioethics department at the University of Minnesota and publishes engaging narratives about modern medical-ethical dilemmas in decidedly unacademic places like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mother Jones* and the *New Yorker*.

His last book, *Better than Well: American Medicine meets the American Dream* (Norton; 2003) was an innovative indictment of our modern love affair with enhancement technologies. His newest book treads upon more well-worn ground mapping out the pharmaceutical industry's dominance over the practice of medicine. Those tiring of the subject might be quick to write off this book as they would a copycat drug, but they'd miss out on some entertaining adventures on medicine's dark side.

Elliott's tales revolve around pharma's canny ability to insert itself firmly and often inappropriately in the practice of medicine, but he recounts them without rancour or spite. He saves his ammo for exposing how the rest of us — patients, physicians and academics — are easily played like rubes in the hands of pharma's spin machine.

You get the sense that Elliott is close to many of the eccentrics who populate *White Coat*, most of whom have worked on pharma's dime, from celebrity spokespeople to public relations geniuses, from his brother Hal, to academic "thought leaders."

Beacon Press

In the journalistic axiom of "show, don't tell," Elliott finds people with surprising levels of self-awareness to describe the journeys they have traveled and the ethical conundrums they bump into along the way. One such journey involves his brother Hal, a psychiatrist who had a brief stint as a "key opinion leader" for a pharmaceutical company, initially giving talks to local doctors on depression and then moving on to become part of the company's stable of speakers. Hal describes his abrupt shock when he discovered how he was being used, saying it was as if one minute you're just being nice to someone at a party because your boss asked you to and the next you "find yourself on the way to a Bangkok brothel in the cargo hold of an unmarked plane. And you say, 'Whoa, this is not what I agreed to'."

Elliott introduces us to his friend Joel Roselin, a research ethicist at Columbia University who could be one of the few people in America who marketed drugs as a child. He was filmed for video news releases his public relations executive father produced for pharmaceutical

companies, appearing in the first one "when he was five or six." After literally a lifetime of doing public relations for the pharmaceutical industry, he recalls his epiphany one day while sitting in the exam room waiting for his own doctor. He looked around and saw the usual industry paraphernalia found in most doctors' offices and the thought flew out of him: "I hope he's getting his information from the medical literature and not from people like me."

The nub of the problem is that so much of our modern medical enterprise is coming from the very industry that makes money off of it (including, sadly, much of the medical literature). Elliott reveals his own self-discovery along the way describing his move from medicine to philosophy and medical ethics "mainly because I wanted to escape." It's no surprise that his new field, bioethics (which one sociologist dubbed the "public relations division of modern medicine") could also be a refuge for scoundrels and miscreants.

The downside to *White Coat Black Hat* is that this terrain has largely been tracked before and you may have already met a number of his characters in other recent books. Having said that, Elliott is clearly an academic who chooses to write for people who enjoy the simple act of reading, delivering fascinating stories and a clear shout from the rooftops that we all need to be on guard in a medical system in which deception is often not just tolerated but rewarded.

Uncovering that dark side won't provide a balanced picture of contemporary medicine — but if you're looking for a romp in the shadowy underbelly of the pharmaceutical industrial complex — you'll find adventures galore here.

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