



## Realized medicine

### To do no harm: learning to care for the seriously ill

Alan C. Mermann

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How can medical students learn to become compassionate physicians, sensitive to the intensely private concerns of others who are very sick? How will they prevent their potential lapse into the negative professional traits they will see in their future teachers: avoidance of the seriously ill and an unfortunate and all-too-apparent inability to talk about personal issues?

Despite the disparaging view of the medical profession expressed in this passage from Alan Mermann's *To Do No Harm*, the author's message is one of hope and encouragement. Mermann practised medicine for 28 years before retiring to become chaplain at Yale University's School of Medicine. Recognizing the needs of medical students as they struggled to learn to care for patients, he developed a first-year "Seminar on the Seriously Ill Patient" in which participants meet regularly with a patient volunteer (the "teacher" or "patient teacher") and are then given an opportunity to reflect on the learning that results. At this early stage in the students' training, there is no expectation of expertise or authority; the focus is on insights bestowed by the patient teachers. As the students learn to understand their patient teachers and their illnesses, a growth in self-awareness, as well as in the traditional skills of listening and talking, becomes possible. Although Mermann discusses the experiences of some of the students, his book is not a course description or how-to presentation. Rather, it is a reflection on the ways in which people react to serious illness and the difficulties that physicians face in providing compassionate and knowledgeable care.

Many of Mermann's ideas are illustrated by patient stories. Some of the

stories are sad, others are comforting, but all allow the reader to learn along with the medical student how to better understand serious illness and its meaning for patients – and for doctors. The volume begins with a brief outline of research into the characteristics and coping strategies of medical students and physicians. This is followed by thoughtful chapters on various aspects of suffering, the variety of human responses to suffering, and the search for meaning in life. The strength of the book lies in Mermann's ability to promote the reader's self-reflection on such complex and important themes with clarity, brevity and without jargon.

For physicians to meet the needs of their patients they must recognize not just physical concerns (at which we do, for the most part, not too bad a job), but mental and spiritual suffering as well. As a profession, we have acknowledged that we need to do better at meeting the emotional and psychological needs of patients. It is the spiritual aspects that seem to cause the greatest discomfort. Because so many of us view the world from a secular point of view, or are fearful of infringing on the belief systems of others, spiritual suffering often goes unrecognized and unmanaged. Mermann's accessible discussion of human spirituality and its relationship with illness is clear, down to earth and thought provoking. The meaning that our lives have for us and the inner, secret places from which we commune with whatever we choose to support us through our lives are aspects of spirituality in all of us. An understanding of our death in the context of ongoing cre-

ativity and purpose makes it possible to contemplate the unthinkable. Only by grappling with one's own spiritual nature is it possible to be of some help to patients struggling in this way.

Although Mermann clearly wants patients to benefit from compassionate and understanding care, the benefits that physicians gain from providing such care are tremendous. His last chapter, "The Realized Life of the Physician," discusses the possibilities that physicians enjoy for a meaningful life. The burdens of the profession (dealing with constant uncertainty, being privy to human weaknesses of every sort, and witnessing the plight of others for which one can offer consolation but not relief) are unchangeable, but the benefits are tremendous. Our profession allows us to do work that is worthwhile, is respected above many others, provides fascinating challenges and offers a financially comfortable life. And yet many doctors are unhappy. Mermann suggests that the reason for this is the failure of medical training to teach us to be engaged in the personal concerns, attitudes and convictions of people in our care. Although he does not use the term "patient-centred care," this is what he is describing, and he is convinced that caregivers suffer when they cannot meet their patients' need for compassion and empathy. Coming to terms with the futility of making judgements on the values, lifestyles and beliefs of others is also key. Achieving a sense of satisfaction must be difficult if not impossible when one is aware of patient attitudes and unmet needs that seem, from the physician's perspective, unacceptable. Mermann's reflections should stimulate readers to consider their own values and the meaning that their professional work holds for them.

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