mystifying behaviors on the part of either patients or themselves.

For family medicine educators, the chapter on Balint groups by Sternlieb, Scott, Lichtenstein, Nease, and Freedy is an expert introduction to this model of reflective practice. It may also be useful to residents or medical students enrolled in a Balint group as a means of preparation for the process. The psychodynamic perspective works comfortably within a family systems theoretical frame and will be useful to educators responsible for psychosocial teaching in residency programs and medical schools. It may provide a new vantage point from which to teach patient engagement and motivation, communication skills, and empathy training. (However, most chapters don’t provide the checklists, pearls, and skills breakdown for which our residents clamor.)

I plan to use the book in my teaching, especially the chapter on living with chronic illness. Other chapters will inform my clinical care—from a new perspective on my patient who is a liver transplant candidate to a different way to approach conversation with caregivers of elderly parents. This book is a welcome addition to my resource list and adds a missing piece to the literature on the modern medical experience. If we are aiming for truly placing the whole patient at the center of care, we cannot afford to dismiss their inner workings.

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Drugs for Life: How Pharmaceutical Companies Define Our Health
Joseph Dumit

Many books now available discuss the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on medical practice, including one—Hooked: Ethics, the Medical Profession, and the Pharmaceutical Industry—by family physician Howard Brody, MD, that was reviewed in these pages several years ago. Each book approaches the topic from a slightly different point of view. In Drugs for Life, Joseph Dumit, director of Science and Technology Studies and professor of anthropology at the University of California-Davis, reviews how for 50 years the pharmaceutical industry has worked with emerging medical and statistical science to redefine matters such as health, risk, and doctor-patient relationships in order to grow markets and expand profit margins.

Dumit relies on ethnography—the systematic investigation and description of cultural phenomena using qualitative research methods—to study the intersection of medicine and industry. Over 8 years he used participant observation, key-informant interviews, and media analysis to appreciate how marketing strategies, clinical trials, corporate research, and screening tests all affect perceptions of health among both lay people and medical professionals. In the six chapters of Drugs for Life, each of which could stand alone as an independent article, he respectively tackles such topics as:

• The perception of personal health risk in the face of illness
• The influence of direct-to-consumer advertising on physicians’ practices and the doctor-patient relationship
• The corporate redefinition of health as the number of prescriptions sold
• The concept of “mass health,” the idea that health is now a numerical “line you cross” (whether, for example, in terms of a depression score or cholesterol level)
• The correlation between statistically significant clinical trial results and return on investment
• The consequences of fear (and anxiety of untoward health consequences) on a numbers-based approach to medicine.

He concludes with a final chapter that examines what he calls “surplus health”—the relatively marginal statistical benefit derived from industry-promoted screening tests and medication management—and how its basis in corporate returns has warped perceptions of treatment and cure.

In Drugs for Life there is a fair amount of “anthrojargon” that may be off-putting for family medicine educators. (Dumit is, after all, an anthropologist.) Nonetheless, this book or one of its kind is an important read for those involved in the care of patients or the education
of medical students or residents. While these books all discuss the effects of corporate involvement on clinical decision making and the culture of medical practice—and there clearly is an ongoing debate about the merits of such involvement—more importantly they touch on issues of personal health care and the role physicians play when advising and attending to their patients. Knowledgeably addressing such issues demands a well-versed understanding of the subject, and reading Drugs for Life (or another referenced alternative) is an important step in gaining such an understanding.

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References

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