The Orange Wire Problem and Other Tales From the Doctor’s Office

David Watts

University of Iowa Press, 2009, 186 pp., $25 hardcover.

David Watts, MD, an internist and gastroenterologist who practices in San Francisco, writes bestselling books on the physician-patient relationship and has produced a PBS national broadcast on poetry and the art of medicine. His book, *The Orange Wire Problem and Other Tales from the Doctor’s Office* is a compilation of short stories from his private practice that illustrates the balance of medical science and humanities with a personal touch to fit each patient.

The author reflects on his visits with patients from a close-up first-person perspective. Each story is a moving account that takes the reader right into the moment with the doctor and patient. He varies his approach with metaphors, personal expression, action, self-disclosure, and dialogue. Often the stories end without resolution in a way that parallels real life medical practice.

The reader witnesses the physician creatively managing moral dilemmas and difficult decisions and weighing the potential benefits of placebos and the power of belief. The doctor candidly shares his personally humorous but vulnerable “physician heal thyself” moments such as trying to examine patients while wearing a crutch and an arm sling. End-of-life scenes with patients are graphically portrayed. One hilarious story shows the doctor poking holes in the faulty logic of insurance company personnel. Others describe the doctor working through his frustrations of feeling used by patients on multiple pain medications or the power of silence when a patient needs time to talk. The physician faces clinical challenges with scientific rigor combined with psychological awareness and a caring soul. Some of the stories show how the practice of medicine is at times tragic yet often deeply rewarding.

The stories rivet the readers’ attention while important nuances of doctor-patient relationship skills also come to life. For example, the author lets the reader experience his internal dialogue about how to respond in the moment to anxious and confused patients. He uses simple analogies to make complex medical terms easier for patients to understand. He tells the reader how he pauses before answering and looks the patient in the eye. He stops to consider whether or not to say something directly. As a patient yells frantically about another doctor’s opinion, he shares his first processing of his own feelings, taking “a beat or two” to “boot up his brain computer” and then responds in a way that fosters a calm and productive dialogue. This is followed by a down to earth rendition of a doctor and patient reflecting on the patients’ appreciation of the doctors willingness to listen to his perspective and subsequently share useful medical counsel.

Physicians and patients are likely to enjoy learning more about the art of medicine from these stories. They are filled with suspense and captivating detail that compels one to keep reading, to reflect, and in the process to become more self-aware.

This book is a masterpiece that will entertain, educate, and inspire. It has been well received when used in our family medicine residency program in Hanford, CA. It is an excellent springboard for discussion about various doctor-patient relationship issues. I recommend it without reservation for use with medical students, residents, primary care physicians, and other health care providers.

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