Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic

Julie Livingston
Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2012, 228 pp., $23.95, paperback

The face of medicine in Africa, more than almost anywhere else, is in a state of rapid change. As antiretrovirals have begun to relegate HIV/AIDS to chronic disease status, Africa has seen a surge in the diagnosis of cancer. In *Improvising Medicine*, ethnographer Julie Livingston explores the challenges of treating cancer during this emerging epidemic at the only dedicated cancer ward in Botswana, a country whose national language previously did not even have a word for the disease.

*Improvising Medicine* looks first at the rise of cancer in Botswana and then moves on to examining the challenges of providing care amid uncertainty in the context of relative scarcity where vital machines are often broken, drugs go in and out of stock, and bed space is always at a premium. The author points out that this is further confounded by inability to apply traditional Western cancer treatment concepts to patients who are already immunosuppressed due to co-infection with HIV or tuberculosis. Doctors in Botswana must both maintain professional expertise to practice one day in a fully functional oncology ward, while using their empirical skills in the present, calibrating diagnostic ability, therapeutic supply, and epidemiologic knowledge. Finally, *Improvising Medicine* describes the distinctly social nature of cancer diagnosis and treatment in Botswana and the interplay of culture with suffering and the acknowledgment of pain. This insight into the different cultural experience of disease is perhaps its greatest strength and an important concept for all who anticipate participating in a global health experience.

*Improvising Medicine* can be a challenging read for the average physician due to the social anthropology and ethnography terms and concepts presented throughout. Moving personal stories of patients, families, and ward staff are interspersed generously, though, and help to make these concepts more understandable to the uninitiated. Additionally, this book includes both extensive references as well as a thorough index, allowing the interested reader to pursue topics presented in greater depth or to easily refer back to key topics.

*Improvising Medicine* is best suited to those who are interested in global health or who provide medical care across cultures. While its primary subject is cancer, the points the author makes regarding the view of medical care priorities in resource-poor countries, as well as the culture-dependent experience of disease, are well taken and can be applied to work in other areas of the world. It will also be an important resource for those teaching global health or cultural competence, and the vignettes interspersed throughout the chapters can be used to generate student discussion.

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