



Book review

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Cautionary Tales - Authentic Case Histories from Medical Practice, Second Edition by John Murtagh

Reviewed by: Assoc. Prof. Datuk Dr. Daniel M. Thuraiappah
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Kuala Lumpur, Chairman of Council, Academy of Family
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This compendium of anecdotes of stories of patients gathered over a period of 40 years of clinical practice is a treasure trove of experience. One stands to marvel at the initiatives which by reason of wisdom have driven man to unravel the mysteries of medicine in outreach places by rudimentary reasoning. The author has threaded the various case histories, no doubt encountered at different periods of his practice, into a gentle continuity by cataloguing them under 24 headings spread over 334 pages. The humour which is seen on hindsight and which may not have been evident at the time, is woven cleverly into the fabric of the tales. This type of recapping and retelling of such a rich storehouse of clinical occurrences is reminiscent of teaching by apprenticeship of old, methods which have become rare since the 20th century. It is in stark contrast to current instant methods of teaching to instil affective learning skills and psychomotor skills.

The case histories have been related in an educational manner, so much so that teachers in family medicine and both undergraduate and postgraduate students will be enriched in a vicarious manner. The skilfulness in incorporating current values into the 40 years of case histories makes the experience of reading the tales in a manner in which one could identify oneself with the author's experience and thereby "derive pleasure, insight and wisdom as well" as stated in the "Foreword".

Each case history has a postscript of reflection on the case to conclude with the "Lesson Learnt". The book also conveys various aspects of communication, consultations, counselling skills, professionalism, ethics and an insight into the laws of that time. The tales further reveal the expectations of the patients, medical colleagues, the public and the politicians and the methods used by the author to come to terms in a professional manner and gain the respect of the patients at

the same time. The period during which the author practised were the glorious times of the solo general practitioner who earned the respect of patients and was held in high regard. However, there was a heavy price to pay.

The publication is well laid out with several examples of notes to apply some of the skills used by the author. It is also well indexed for easy reference.

The author has left a difficult legacy to follow and a great inspiration to young registrars and student family physicians. By providing a yardstick, aspiring general practitioners will find a great example in Dr John Murtagh, the scribe and author of "Cautionary Tales-Authentic Case Histories from Medical Practice"; a book, well worth owning.

Reviewed by: Dr Naomi P Harris, Lecturer, Department of
General Practice, School of Primary Health Care,
Monash University

"To practise medicine is a privilege, to practise it well is a difficult challenge, but not to learn from one's mistake is unforgivable" is the opening line in Murtagh's collection of case histories. Murtagh, his wife Dr Jill Rosenblatt and others share with us the case histories that have shaped their practice over many years. Individual cautionary tales of Prof Murtagh were originally published regularly in the Australian Family Physician (official journal of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners) over many years.

Lessons can be learnt from each tale this book, and it is structured to allow the reader to attempt determining a diagnosis in each case prior to the correct diagnosis being revealed. 'Bones and Abdominal Groans' teaches us all to be mindful of what we say to children in relation to their endless questioning of "why?". In this instance Prof Murtagh stated that Eric the skeleton had passed away from swallowing bubble gum only to be called to a very distressed 5 year old girl after she too swallowed her bubble gum. Even the age old Vegemite makes a staring



role in the book in 'Are you trying to kill me Doc?' when an English visitor was subjected to eating vegemite as per a nurse who told him 'Doc Murtagh thinks it's great medicine, especially for expats!'. And as a final insightful illustration from Cautionary Tales, we are reminded to take the time to correctly demonstrate the use of medical delivery systems when Prof Murtagh tells us about 'The asthma inhaler shemozzle'.

Prof Murtagh AM is Emeritus Professor, Monash University and Professorial Fellow in the Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne. He is also Guest Professor, Peking University and Adjunct Clinical Professor, University of Notre Dame WA. Prof Murtagh is also the patron of the general Practice Registrar's Australia (GPRA).

Other titles by Prof Murtagh that are utilised worldwide include General Practice, Practice Tips, and Patient Education. General Practice has been translated into over 11 languages and has been adopted by the Russian and Chinese Ministries of Health.

About the book

Title: Cautionary Tales - Authentic Case Histories from Medical Practice, Second Edition

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