



## Book Review AMJ 2013, 6, 5

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### What Matters in Medicine

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Due to a variety of reasons, among them increasing specialisation and greater use of technology, primary care medicine is in decline throughout most of the world. Modern medicine is becoming more expensive with even rich nations finding the high expenses difficult to bear. Even many developed countries like the United States have not been able to ensure quality health care for all their citizens. I have long been a strong believer in primary care and am still fascinated by the romantic notion of a family doctor ensuring continuity of care and being closely involved in the life of the community for which the doctor is responsible.

I recently read a fascinating book titled *What matters in medicine: Lessons from a life in primary care* written by David Loxterkamp, a family doctor who has been providing primary care to the residents of Belfast, a small town in Maine, United States for around three decades. The book is in three parts: staging, departure and arrival. 'Staging' describes three general practitioners (GPs) who came before the author and created a reservoir of goodwill among patients and the public through their deeds. 'Departure' describes the author's stint as a GP in Belfast together with short, poignant patient stories. The last section 'Arrival' addresses the prospects of primary care and its possible role in ensuring and maintaining the health of patients.

The author describes the work of three GPs, Ernest Ceriani in Colorado, John Eskill in England and the author's father Edward Loxterkamp in Iowa. I especially enjoyed the insights the author provides about the joys and challenges of a life in primary care. The beginning years of the National Health Service in Britain and increasing technology and specialisation in medicine in the US in the decade following World War II makes for fascinating reading. Ernest Ceriani was featured in *Life magazine* in an illustrated write up titled 'Country doctor' while John Eskill was the central character of the book 'A fortunate man'. The author's description of his father who died when he was just 13 and whose unfinished agenda he seems to be carrying forward is interesting.

The second section 'Departure' describes the author's practice in Belfast, Maine and his close relationship with his patients. The description is powerful and takes you back in time to the

simple life of a small New England town in the 1960s to 1980s. The resilience of Belfast and how the town managed to survive difficult economic times through hard work and ingenuity makes it fascinating. The author emphasises that an illness and a visit to a doctor is often indicative of a deeper unhappiness and problems in the patient's life. Many lifestyle illnesses result from unhealthy behaviours and require the patient to address these and develop a healthier lifestyle with the doctor as an ally.

Due to various reasons, among them disparities in remuneration, longer working hours and greater stress primary care is becoming less popular among medical students and the future of the discipline is often in doubt. The author mentions 14 aphorisms for primary care in the beginning of 'Arrival' which are especially relevant for today's medical students. The old photographs and liberal citations from the literature (both prose and poetry) add to the beauty of the book. This well-written and referenced book will be of interest to all those interested in primary care and the art of healing

**About the book:** David Loxterkamp. *What matters in medicine: Lessons from a life in primary care*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press; 2013. ISBN 978-0-472-11865-6. The book is also available as an e-book.