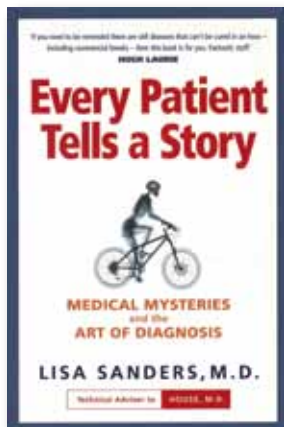


Every Patient Tells a Story Medical Mysteries and the Art of Diagnosis

Lisa Sanders

Australia: Penguin Group, 2009

ISBN 978 067 0073 870, \$32.95



■ **There is a great tradition amongst general practitioners of exchanging 'war stories'. It seems the rarer the disease, the more fascinating the path to diagnosis and we love to share our role as 'disease detectives'. This is the basis of 'Every Patient Tells a Story'.**

This book is written by Lisa Sanders, a physician in the United States who serves as a technical advisor on the television show 'House', and the book is based on her column in the New York Times. Her book attempts to weave together three threads: stories about patients facing diagnostic uncertainty, theories around clinical decision making and challenges for medical education. Each chapter focuses on a theme in clinical decision making, such as the importance of physical examination skills, the role of bias in diagnosis and the need to create a meaningful narrative to explain illness.

There are three major irritants in this structure. One is the tendency for the text to meander through the clinical reasoning landscape without a clear direction or sense of place. Perhaps this is the consequence of its genesis as a series of newspaper columns. For me, this loose structure was exacerbated by the referencing. Relevant articles are clustered at the end of the text in a series of 'notes' which are not referenced in the text. This makes it difficult to know which of the author's claims are based on her opinions and which are grounded in contemporary research. The final irritant for me is the overly dramatic tone: is it really necessary to know the hairstyle and eye colour of every protagonist in the book?

Having said all that, this is a light read and touches on important concepts in the process of diagnosis. And for those of us who relish a good medical mystery, there is plenty of opportunity to guess the diagnosis before the author reveals it at the end of each story.

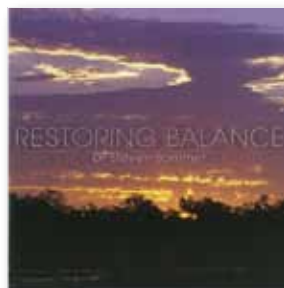
Louise Stone
Sydney, NSW

Restoring Balance

Steven Sommer

Australia: Steven Sommer, 2009

Available from ssommer@aapt.net.au, \$25.00 (plus P&H)



■ **'You need to relax!' How frequently would you use this phrase with your patients or murmur it to yourself? Most general practitioners would acknowledge the importance of relaxation in maintaining health and that the regular practise of meditation can be a useful tool to achieve this. Unfortunately, we rarely have the time to explore the presence and management of stress with our patients.**

This CD offers a solution to this. It is a practical aid to assist GPs in educating patients in relaxation techniques. It provides an introduction to meditation with information on the benefits and advice on how to implement meditation into daily life. There are also meditations to practise, ranging from breathing exercises, referred to as 'commas', which take a minute or two, to longer, easy to follow meditations.

I would recommend this CD as an educational aid for patients, or indeed, to GPs interested in personal meditation practice techniques.

Gillian Singleton
Melbourne, Vic

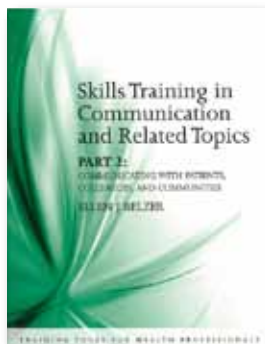
Skills Training in Communication and Related Topics

Part 2: Communicating with patients, colleagues, and communities

Ellen J Belzer

United Kingdom: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd, 2009

ISBN 13 978 1 84619 278 4, \$82.50



■ This is a book of 'training tools' for use in small group settings, ranging from discussions of active listening in medical consultations, to role plays of meetings between health bureaucrats and stakeholders. In fact the 'target' audience is so broad that it may cater inadequately to the needs of any one group. However, there may be some material of interest to general practitioners. You might like to organise a practice meeting and run a role play where your reception staff get to enact a customer service ethic not unlike 'Basil Fawlty's', and then discuss how to improve patient relationships at the front desk. Or you might like to get together with some colleagues to improve your communication skills with the 'true confessions' exercise, for example, where those interviewers who interrupt a patient inside 3 minutes are 'gonged' off.

For the most part, however, this book is of limited usefulness to GPs. While Belzer claims that the exercises in this book are designed to promote 'learning by doing', in fact, most of them promote discussion about, rather than practise of, communication skills. Belzer provides a tool for rating one's own communication skills – a field where self report is notoriously unreliable, and relies heavily on case vignettes which are then discussed rather than run as role plays. Even the role plays are mostly scripted and therefore not about skill rehearsal. The book is an evidence free zone: claims are made about the importance of certain skills with neither reference to research nor opportunity for genuine feedback about the effect of those skills in practice. Case scenarios lean toward humour rather than believability. While educators might dip into this book for curriculum inspiration on a slow day, I think that GPs will look elsewhere for material relevant to communication in general practice.

Petrina Barson
Melbourne, Vic

Contraception – Healthy Choices A Contraceptive Clinic in a Book (2nd edition)

Family Planning NSW

Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2009

ISBN 978 1 7422 3136 5, \$34.95



■ This little book outlines for a lay audience the various methods of contraception available in Australia. It updates the first edition of the book produced by Family Planning New South Wales in 2002. Written in simple language, and addressed directly to the reader, it begins with a brief chapter on 'bodies and how pregnancy happens', and proceeds to a chapter on each method, with a closing peek at what is on the horizon for new developments. The diagrams are easy to understand, and each chapter contains a shaded section on 'how do I use (this method)?' It also contains a glossary of the terms used, and a phonetic spelling of 'how to say these words' in each chapter.

This book is a useful resource for our patients. While the language is simple and accessible to nearly all patients, some may find 160 pages on contraception a bit overwhelming. Other more educated patients will be looking for more complex and detailed information than is provided, eg. more detail on how hormones work, or frequency of side effects. A section addressing common myths about contraceptive methods might also be of use. Given that most people consult GPs for contraceptive advice, perhaps there is a little too much emphasis on family planning centres as a source of information, although local doctors are listed as another such source. Likewise, the 'useful contacts' section lists the family planning organisations for each state, and suggests the reader contact the 'telephone book or online for other services'. More detailed information on other contacts, and a list of useful websites would be a welcome addition.

Barbara Jones
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