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BEHIND THE CURTAIN

A Peek at Life from within the ER

Sterling, Jeffrey E.

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BOOK REVIEW

Drawing on over 20 years of experience in emergency medicine, debut author Sterling presents alternately humorous and sobering stories of the “controlled chaos” of a hospital emergency room.

In these wry, short essays, the author strikes an appropriate balance between serious warnings and diverting stories. In one, he tells of a nurse who was murdered in the office below his, proving that a hospital can be a risky environment; in others, though, he provides plenty of laughs. Many pieces tread a fine line between being comical and raunchy; for example, the author writes of finding a potato up a patient’s anus and of treating a four-hour erection. He uses a mix of the past and present tense to re-create the immediacy of climactic moments. Snappy conversations—such as one that he has with macho young men who assume that they’re invincible against sexually transmitted diseases—reflect his no-nonsense attitude toward patient responsibility: “It’s my job to treat, not to judge, but sometimes it’s very difficult,” Sterling admits. Too many cases, he notes, result from reckless behavior involving overeating, alcohol, drugs, or careless driving. For instance, he describes one drag-racing fatality with three inches shaved off his skull and a man who drank window-washing fluid and suffered permanent visual damage. Even the most tragic, cautionary tales can still hold a grain of hope, though. In one of the strongest anecdotes, “Extracting Life from Death,” he writes of a woman, nine months pregnant, who got into a high-speed crash while not wearing a seatbelt. She was dead on arrival at the hospital, but Sterling delivered her baby girl alive. The book proves to be as informative as it is entertaining, thanks to its reader-friendly tactics: unfamiliar terms appear in italics, connections are made between similar cases, and bullet-pointed lists detail procedures and treatment options. Taken together, they’ll provide laymen with a way through what Sterling calls the “never-ending alphabet soup of protocols.” A gripping step-by-step narration of a cricothyrotomy (which involves making an incision in the throat to create an airway) is a highlight: “*Gain control of the wind-pipe with one hand. Let’s go. Stab incision with only the tip of the scalpel.*” Two messages come through clearly in this collection: knowledge is power, and it’s better to be safe than sorry.

Accessible and often amusing medical anecdotes.

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