

Out of Hours Books

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

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'That's enough. You are talking beyond the brief of this conference. Many of us know all this and agree with you, but these are very large forces outside of our control. There really is no point in going on about it any more.'

I think I might just manage another thrust:

'But if we believe it to be so important and true we must always say it, and go on saying it: like hammering in a nail. That may be tribulating and difficult for some, but only that kind of resolved tenacity will change things. Not talking about it — out of a kind of "decency" or tact — becomes a kind of surrender, or even collusion. We just add ourselves to the vast mass of totalitarian inertia ... Our system is paralysing and pitting us against one another.'

'I really am going to stop you there.' Dr N glowers with authority.

I demur and retreat. I respect and like Dr N: it would be easy to now say too much. There is a brief lull. To my right a middle-aged GP, Dr G, is sitting. I have been aware of her silent attentiveness and her supportive nods. As Dr N begins her summing up, Dr G turns towards me, shielding her mouth with her hand so that it is visible only to me. Her whisper is silent but slowly and clearly enunciated:

'I agree with you.'

I nod: a fleeting, furtive, subversive alliance. This brief, sequestered, but richly complex interchange and its context — what does it augur for our healthcare culture?

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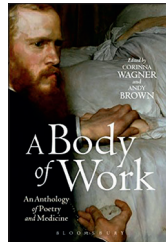
REFERENCE

1. Selye H. *The stress of life*. 2nd rev. edn. New York: McGraw-Hill/Schaum's Outlines, 1978.

A Body of Work: An Anthology of Poetry and Medicine

Edited by Corinna Wagner and Andy Brown

Bloomsbury, 2016, PB, 560pp, £24.99, 978-1472513298



A BODY BEAUTIFUL

'Verse is for healthy arty-farties. The dying and surgeons use prose.'
(Peter Reading, 'From C', 1984)

This haiku is the first of hundreds of poems related to medicine and the body in this innovative and substantial anthology. The first of its kind of this magnitude, it indicates the growing popularity and influence of the medical humanities.

Each of the eight sections, such as Consuming, Treatment and Hospitals, Practitioners and Professionals, comprises a chronologically arranged series of poems on the relevant topic, followed by a short selection of historical prose writing that provides some context for the verse.

The first section, Body as Machine, for example, includes the inevitable extract from Offray De La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* (1749): *'The human body is a machine that winds up its own springs'*; but, more surprisingly, 'Religion and Neurology' from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) in the prose section.

The poems themselves provide rich seams of material to mine for illustrations for medical writing and for use in group exercises, for example, in communication skills and understanding empathy (and expanding the capacity to express it).

All of life is gathered here. From the humorous:

*'A mighty creature is the germ,
Though smaller than the pachyderm.'*
(Ogden Nash, 'The Germ', 1925)

to the sobering:

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*'disease has expanded my horizons
and pain
spread the good word.'*
(Peter Meinke, 'The Patient', 1977)

from ecstatic joy:

'Oft have I thrilled at deeds of high emprise'
(Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, 'To Madame Curie', 1921)

to dark despair:

*'Yes! in the radiant air how could I know
How black it is, how fast it is, below?'*
(A Mary F Robinson, 'Neurasthenia', 1888)

and, of course, from birth:

*'It is birth: at the first breath how curiously
the tissue of the lungs flower
with the sudden inrush of blood.'*
(Jo Shapcott, 'Twin Found in Man's Chest', 2002)

to death:

*'Dead kids upset me.
There's no drink
to take away the taste
of a fresh face rotting.'*
(Dorothy Porter, 'Dead Kids', 1994)

and perhaps even beyond:

*'In your afterlife nightie
You are pirouetting expectantly for the last
time.'*
(Paul Durcan, 'Golden Mothers Driving West', 2009)

Poetry, as the book's foreword suggests, is a way of storytelling *'that is particularly adaptable to making sense of our experiences of living and dying in a body.'*

This volume helps us, as GPs, to do this both for ourselves and our patients.

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