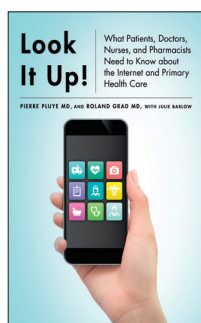


Life & Times Books

Look it up! What Patients, Doctors, Nurses, and Pharmacists Need to Know About the Internet and Primary Health Care

Pierre Pluye, Roland Grad, and Julie Barlow

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, HB, 200pp, £16.99, 978-0773551367



NAVIGATING TECHNOLOGY FOR HEALTH

Given the numerous resources designed to aid clinical decision making, I often wonder where to start looking for information on some occasions and when to stop on others. It is challenging to integrate best evidence in practice given the time restraints and limited resources in general practice. *Look it up!* is enlightening because it provides guidance on effectively finding answers to reach value judgements for patients by navigating the rapidly evolving and enormous repertoire of digital health information.

The book is an easy read — structured in a case scenario format filled with relevant examples from general practice, such as cancer screening and polypharmacy. It is filled with clinical pearls along the way, and I learnt more by trying to solve the cases by putting my own research strategies to the test before reading the answers provided. Aimed at anyone with an interest in the topic, the book is very digestible as it largely avoids jargon.

The book's last chapter describes a future in which technology will be married to all aspects of clinical practice in the next 20 years. This is something I find hard to believe because of its simplistic view of the economic and social contexts that enable change. Case in point: not every medical service in the NHS is paperless despite millions of pounds having been invested over the years to achieve this vision.

The book is filled with resources used

commonly in North America. Nonetheless, the principles apply across borders so it will be a valuable read for GPs in the UK who want to provide evidence-based care to their patients using technology. Given the tremendous societal and professional expectations for the doctor to know everything, I found the book reassuring because it explains why it is OK — even better — to *Look it up!*

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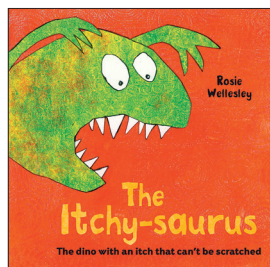
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The Itchy-saurus: the Dino with an Itch That Can't Be Scratched

Rosie Wellesley

Pavilion Children's, 2018, PB, 32pp, £6.99, 978-1843653684



BREAKING THE ITCH-SCRATCH CYCLE

Although eczema is common, many children who grow up with it may feel alone and isolated, and resist the application of topical treatments that will help treat their symptoms. We also know that parents/carers of children with eczema employ a variety of tactics to engage them in the use of creams and ointments — some more sustainable than others.¹

So how might a children's book about a Tyrannosaurus Rex with eczema help? In this book, Rosie Wellesley, a GP, writer/illustrator, and parent of a child with eczema, has used her combined talents and experience to write this short and colourful story about how eczema can disturb sleep and make people feel miserable, yet be improved using creams, in this case supplied by a platypus called Doc Bill.

The illustrations are bright and attractive

and we, as fellow parent of/older child with eczema, liked the dinosaur characters and the wordplay (T-Rex-cema, for example). The book also introduces distraction as a technique to break the itch-scratch cycle. One can nitpick over some of the detail (perhaps Doc Bill could have offered lotions, gel, or ointment instead of creams, for instance) and the story fills a niche but is unlikely to be sought out by parents of children without eczema.

Overall, it's a welcome and professionally produced resource to be able to signpost parents to, as part of the more specific support that primary care can offer families affected by this condition.

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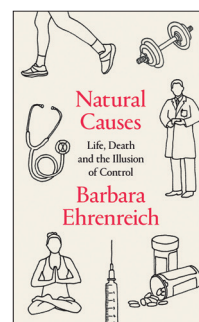
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Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control

Barbara Ehrenreich

Granta Books, 2018, HB, 256pp, £16.99, 978-1783782413



MALIGN MACROPHAGES AND THE MADNESS OF MINDFULNESS

Barbara Ehrenreich is an American writer with an enviable breadth of knowledge, an

acerbic wit, and a willingness to tackle the big issues of contemporary society — as the subtitle of her latest book attests. She has a PhD in cellular immunology, and the genesis of this book lay in her shock on learning that macrophages play an apparently dual role in the body, on the one hand encouraging inflammatory responses to invasive agents, and on the other aiding tumour growth and metastasis. This prompts her to ask: if we cannot trust the workings of our physiology at the cellular level, to what extent can or should we aim to control our bodies and minds, and hence our health and longevity?

After ranging across a diverse array of topics including gym workouts (for which she is a practising advocate in her eighth decade), evidence-based medicine, the abuse of power by the medical profession, the growth of narcissism in our self-obsessed culture, the solipsistic practice of mindfulness, and our changing attitudes towards death, she returns to the 'self vs. non-self' paradigm of immunology and its implications for auto-immune disease, pregnancy and menstruation, and the ageing process.

Along the way are brief diversions on the emergence of the very notion of 'the self', attributed to Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers; the evolution of religious beliefs from animism through polytheism and monotheism to their widespread abandonment; and the ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, the former indulging in luxury 'wellness retreats' and the latter being held morally culpable for their ill health (and dying earlier).

Having argued convincingly that we have much less control over our fates than we are led to believe by doctors, lifestyle gurus, priests, and Gwyneth Paltrow, the atheistic Ehrenreich takes solace from the thought that the universe, even in its inanimate components, is full of unpredictability and what she rather mystifyingly calls 'agency'. Personally I find little comfort in 'the ghostly flickerings of quantum fluctuations' that she celebrates; on the other hand I do like the idea that a carefully induced psychedelic trip can ease the existential pain of terminal illness. Put it on my death plan, please.

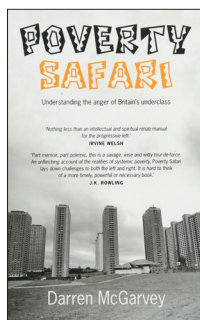
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X698741>

Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass

Darren McGarvey

Luath Press Ltd, 2017, PB, 224pp, £6.29,
978-1912147038



STRUCTURE VERSUS AGENCY

It is often said that statistics are human beings with the tears wiped away. Halfway through *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass*, the first book by the Scottish rapper, writer, and columnist Darren McGarvey, the author provides us with some statistics.

Now in his mid-thirties, he looks back at his upbringing in Pollok, a so-called 'deprived' area of Glasgow, with his four siblings:

'Four out of five have experienced alcohol or substance misuse problems at some point. Five have experienced long term financial problems which involve debilitating debt or defaults and poor credit history.'

The list goes on:

'Five have experienced abuse and neglect at the hands of a care giver ... five have experienced health problems associated with poor nutrition and lifestyle.'

Then, in stark contrast:

'Zero have gone to university. Zero are on the housing ladder. Zero have any savings. Zero go on foreign holidays at least once a year. And none of us care for Radio 2, yoga or Quorn-based food products either.'

The tears may have been wiped away, but the anger is palpable. McGarvey wants the reader to understand his anger (and, by extension, that of 'Britain's underclass', particularly relevant in the context of Brexit) by drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the political class, the damaging effects of widening socioeconomic (and therefore

health) inequalities, and the false beliefs that people on both sides of the class divide hold about each other.

So, what should we do about it? *'It's not rocket science,'* he writes, *'listen, and those who feel ignored will re-engage passionately.'*

McGarvey is a gifted communicator; in the first of 32 short chapters (each named after a novel, with titles such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Trainspotting*, providing a hint of what's to come), he describes his approach to engaging a small group of female prisoners in a rap workshop. Challenging and insightful, this is recommended reading for anyone involved in small-group teaching or other public engagement activities.

As well as greater empathy, McGarvey's other antidote to fixing our broken politics is to reclaim *'the idea of personal responsibility from a rampant and socially misguided right wing'*. He has changed radically (now sober and living with his partner and baby son), so why can't others?

Alas, if only it were that simple. In keeping with the (rapidly growing) evidence base on Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, McGarvey's apparent 'resilience' may be attributable, at least in part, to the presence of trusted adult support (his child psychologist Marilyn *'had a fundamental influence on the direction of my life, one that remains to this day'*) and to serendipity (recounting a 'sliding doors' moment involving close friends and a crack pipe, he writes *'That day I dodged a bullet. But so many others don't.'*).

Regardless of the route taken, we should be grateful that McGarvey reached a place where he was able to write this book. It's an unflinching and invaluable contribution to the debate about how to fix our broken system, from an authentic and articulate voice of the working class, the likes of which is all too rarely heard in today's political and media landscape.

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Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass was the winner of the Orwell Prize, 2018.

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