

Out of Hours Books

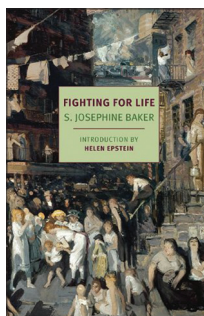
SLUMDOC PIONEER

Fighting for Life

S Josephine Baker

NYRB Classics, 2013

PB, 280pp, £16.95, 978-1590177068



Fighting for Life is the absorbing memoir of American doctor Sara Josephine Baker. She was a pioneer of public health in 1900s New York when the notion of preventive medicine scarcely existed. Her work began in the notorious 'Hell's Kitchen' slums of the Upper West Side where summertime diarrhoeal epidemics killed one in three children before they were five. Such was the filth and destitution, the area was condemned as an 'out and out hog pen' by an official Department of Health report. Nevertheless, Baker took a job there and quickly established home visiting programmes, community baby clinics, and school nurses. She went on to invent silver nitrate capsules to treat babies with ophthalmia neonatorum as well as designing baby clothes that were more convenient to remove. In just 3 years the infant mortality rate fell by 40%. All this was at a time when being a female doctor was scarcely tolerable. She recalls the air being 'sulphuric with comments' after telling one of the most established GPs in New York about her intentions to study medicine. Baker went on to become the first director of the New York Bureau of Child Hygiene from 1908–1923 and became one of the most influential doctors of her generation.

Despite her successes, her observations are never grand, she describes the first few months of medical school as 'half terrifying and half boring', and the reader is gripped by her courage and wit and by the fascinating portraits of the people she meets along the way. As a fledgling doctor, Baker punched a drunk who was beating

his wife while she was trying to deliver their baby. He fell down an entire flight of stairs and she thought she'd killed him. She was the one who finally tracked down the infamous and foul-mouthed Irish cook 'Typhoid Mary' and found herself having to sit on her in the police car in order to apprehend her.

She is drawn into suffrage and meets the Pankhursts and travels to Soviet Russia where she sees state-run abortions being performed without anaesthetic. She led a remarkable life and excelled at a time when medicine was not so much evidence-based as empirical and experimental. The book is a page-turning slice of social and medical history and both funny and inspiring.

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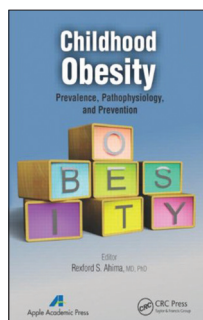
WEIGHTY ISSUES

Childhood Obesity: Prevalence, Pathophysiology, and Management

Rexford S Ahima

Apple Academic Press, 2013

HB, 386pp, £95.00, 978-1926895918



Child obesity is a major problem in the UK and abroad, and GPs regularly witness its profound emotional and physical repercussions. This book presents detailed evidence but on a narrow range of issues, for example, reducing the sale and consumption of sugary, soft drinks is worthwhile; parental body mass index predicts child obesity risk; and exercise improves endothelial function more than

weight loss in obese children, hence benefiting cardiovascular risk even if weight loss is not achieved.

However, the chapter on genetics lacked any sense of practical application, with no exploration of how 'whole genome sequencing technologies will be a large part of the solution' in helping families either today or in the future.

The book confirmed that prevention programmes work not just by boosting physical activity, but also by the consequent reduction in children's exposure to heavy marketing of unhealthy fast foods and soft drinks. But a case example of Sweden's ban of TV advertising to younger children would have been more informative if the authors had included comparison data on its impact.

The discussion about beverages affecting dietary quality was interesting; preschooler milk consumption positively correlates with diet quality but intake is declining. Increases in sugary drinks are displacing nutrient-rich milk, which is clearly associated with child obesity. This could inform those giving individual advice or local pilot interventions.

Despite the topic's relevance to primary care, this is a decidedly academic tome not targeted at GPs or those commissioning childhood weight and lifestyle programmes. Its strong focus on the extent of child obesity was insufficiently balanced, lacking examination of potential interventions; such as influencing behaviour change in differently-aged children, exploring changes to advertising and marketing to children, or evidence around brief interventions relevant to primary care. This book would be suitable for academics working in this important field, whereas those wanting broader generalist training in obesity could make use of the newly launched RCGP obesity e-learning sessions at www.elearning.rcgp.org.uk/obesity.

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