Out of Hours Books

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more anxiety-provoking assessments, but less confidence-building experience than they used to. A recent paper suggests that anxiety impairs empathy and perspective taking.⁷ We also need to think critically about how much choice and information patients want and need because too much can worsen parents' anxiety and undermine confidence. It would be possible to design a study to measure whether parents given assurance and confidence by GPs, reconsult less frequently than those receiving 'usual care'. This may appeal to policy makers and busy GPs, but I don't think we should wait for this quantitative evidence, but act now on what we know parents want and need.

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Reasons to Stay Alive

Matt Haig

*Canongate Books, 2015, PB, 272pp, £7.99,
978-1782115083*

HELPING THE SAD

If reading could be prescribed as therapy, this book would earn its place in any literary formulary. *Reasons to Stay Alive* is the true story of its author, Matt Haig, aged 24 when he developed severe depression and anxiety. His remarkable story takes us on his journey from a vulnerable young man on the verge of suicide, to his tenacious efforts not to succumb to his illness, and his final self-affirming list of forty pieces of advice that show him 'How to live'.

Although it's a given that this book will benefit sufferers of depression, it is equally as beneficial to the wider public as it will help with demystifying mental illness. But the book's real strength lies in its ability to enable physicians to better understand depression: the pages are a canvas of honesty, raw emotions and, at times, chaotic and disorganised thoughts, beautifully demonstrating the endless ruminations often experienced by individuals with depression. We gain an invaluable insight into the mind of a patient with depression, a luxury which a 10 minute consultation will never afford. From the outset, Haig tells us why he wrote a book about depression:

'To lessen that stigma, and ... to try and actually convince people that the bottom of the valley never provides the clearest view.'

Time will tell whether he has achieved the former — although as GPs we ourselves can help to remove the stigma from mental illness by educating patients and their families — but he excels at the latter; his story is inspiring and an almost certain source of encouragement to anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in despair.

To quote Haig's optimism:

'... there's a two-for-one offer on clouds and silver linings. Words, just sometimes, can set you free.'

Yes, they can.

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How Do You Feel? An Interoceptive Moment with Your Neurobiological Self AD (Bud) Craig

*Princeton University Press, 2014, HB,
368pp, £19.57, 978-0691156767*

NEUROLOGY JUST GOT MORE INTERESTING ...

As a medical student in the 1970s I learned that there were two pathways from the body to the brain; one entered the spinal cord and ascended to the brain on the ipsilateral side, carrying discriminatory and pressure touch, and proprioception; the other immediately crossed and ascended on the contralateral side, carrying pain, temperature and something that was (very) vaguely described as 'fine' touch. Both these pathways ascended to the midbrain (thalamus) then projected to the somatosensory cortex. End of story.

Enter Bud Craig, a mathematician who strayed into a neuroscience class where they were doing single cell analysis of thalamic neurons, got hooked and changed to neurology. Struck by a number of anomalies in the explanation of these two sensory pathways from the body to the brain, he determined to work out their neuroanatomy. Fast forward 25 years and his extensive catalogue of