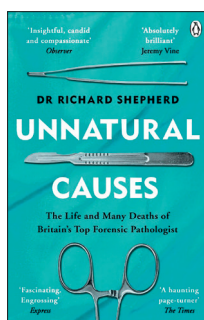


Life & Times Books

Unnatural Causes: the Life and Many Deaths of Britain's Top Forensic Pathologist

Richard Shepherd
Penguin, 2019, PB, 464pp, £8.99, 978-1405923538



SEEKING THE TRUTH

Unnatural Causes begins with the words of Alexander Pope written in 1709: *'Tis not enough, Taste, Judgement, Learning, join; In all you speak, let Truth and Candour shine.'*

Dr Richard Shepherd is a leading forensic pathologist with over 30 years and 23 000 postmortems under his belt. *Unnatural Causes* charts his relentless pursuit of the truth in determining how each of his patients died.

From the victims of mass disasters, to homicides, to those who have died in police custody or in their own homes from unknown causes, it is Shepherd's job to ascertain a cause of death. Each case is described with intrigue and detail, and it is surprisingly satisfying to learn of the methodical approach and routine that each postmortem entails, and even more satisfying to learn of Shepherd's verdict.

From a medical perspective it was a delight to learn new things, for example, the difference between somatic death and cellular death; that a common response to hypothermia is to actually take off one's clothes, that survivors have described feeling very hot as their temperature dropped and believed that stripping off was an appropriate response, and that victims of hypothermia will often seek to die in an enclosed space such as in corners or under tables — so-called 'hide-and-die' syndrome; that post-death the blood vessels provide easy channels for bacteria inside the body to spread, resulting in an *'extraordinary and beautiful fern-like pattern of the veins ... clearly etched on the skin as though tattooed in brown.'*

As well as learning interesting medical

phenomena I learnt a lot about the history of Britain over the last few decades. From the Hungerford massacre in 1987 to the King's Cross fire of the same year, to the Clapham Junction rail crash in 1988 to the *Marchioness* disaster of 1989, *Unnatural Causes* offers almost a capsule of British history from the 80s onwards. Shepherd describes with great clarity the shock each event brought the nation and the ramifications of each, as well as the birth of health and safety culture that many of us not just take for granted now but also bemoan. His observations about corporate and state attitudes to risk and responsibility ring true even today.

Shepherd shares with us some of his most high-profile cases. At the time of carrying out Stephen Lawrence's postmortem he could not have predicted the significance of the patient he was working on. When describing carrying out the postmortem on Princess Diana he states:

'The general rule when presented with a high profile death is to stop. Do everything slowly ... you are under pressure to get things done right now. In half the usual time and with half the usual information. I have learned the hard way that no one says thank you in these cases. Ever.'

This is pertinent advice for every doctor in every specialty.

The part of this book that evoked the most visceral reaction in me was not the florid description of the process of putrefaction or the appearance of a body after drowning; it was when Shepherd discloses to us how and when he became the subject of a GMC investigation. The injustice of a life served to seeking the truth that is then almost dismissed over the quality of some photographs will remind this audience of the thin line that ultimately all doctors tread.

In addition to the professional turmoil, Shepherd does not shy away from describing the personal cost to his sanity and his family that his career has caused him. From the beginning, family and medicine have been closely intertwined and from the death of his mother at 9 to the emotional abyss in his own marriage we understand the conflict and tension there is between the love for one's family and the love for one's vocation and calling.

This is a reflective and poignant memoir; a meditation on mortality and its alter ego

life; a love letter to forensic pathology; a fascinating collection of case studies and vignettes, and a snapshot of British history in the late 20th century.

Unnatural Causes will move, inform, and captivate both medical and lay readers alike.

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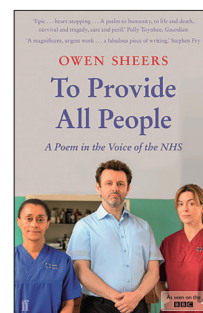
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To Provide All People: a Poem in the Voice of the NHS

Owen Sheers

Faber & Faber, 2019, PB, 128pp, £8.99, 978-0571348084



A LITERARY TONIC AND A COMPASS

All medical graduates in Scotland are provided with a volume of poems¹ with the intention of giving them an insight into the humanities, human circumstance, their role, and their wellbeing.

Poetry can create the most impact in the shortest time and using the least words. Employing rhythm, metre, and rhyme, it grips the reader's interest, offering short episodes of respite — ideal for the frantically complex, difficult, and rapid first years of medicine, encouraging the medical graduates *'to open the eyes to one's own heart'*.²

To Provide All People could be distributed in the same way to all juniors in the UK and read by everyone in the NHS at this current time of low morale. Owen Sheers has written his prose poem in a single, easily transportable volume, the content of which was originally released as a BBC Wales television programme but, interestingly, not on national BBC. He and his family have been cared for by the NHS and he has taken the

time to talk to those who work in it. He reflects their lives with clarity and insight so that reading any page or even a paragraph offers understanding and reflection. Describing the birth of the NHS, he recognises the shared and integrated importance of physical and mental health care for both patients and those who work for the NHS.

I thought of highlighting sections to pass on to colleagues but soon realised that every line can be highlighted: *'The NHS is there for when the pattern breaks, isn't it? When the day we expect, the day we are living, Whoever you are, takes a turn we didn't see coming.'*

Based on conversations he has had, Sheers involves us all — medical, nursing, clerical, ancillary, and patient. He uses poetic economy to describe the journey of the NHS through history, using the analogy of the life events we all experience.

While so clearly describing the dilemmas and difficulties in NHS care he pleads openly, powerfully, and effectively for its continuation, although readers will understand more the low morale among NHS workers.

There is an offer of words that might help to improve it: *'You take away too much of the original idea, and you alter the personality... the psychological aspect, the philosophical even, once that's broken ... real pain, in my experience, the kind that makes you cry, is psychological ... I can tell you how to heal a fracture in a bone but a fracture to a soul? That's harder.'*

At one of his public readings I suggested that Owen Sheers should be Minister of State but he indicated it might be an improbable career move, so, if we cannot have him as Minister, let us have him as the Profession's Poet and aim for his words to have the same level of influence on the further progression of our NHS. In his own words, he is: *'someone who could imagine the journey and in imagining, make it happen.'*

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Leonardo da Vinci: Under the Skin Michael and Stephen Farthing

*Royal Academy of Arts, 2019, HB, 96pp,
£14.95, 978-1912520091*



A LIFE IN DRAWING

In his intriguing prologue to this beautiful and desirable book, Desmond Shawe-Taylor, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, remarks that Renaissance theorists valued drawing as the thinking part of art. In some of the lovely drawings reproduced, and elegantly critiqued by a Professor of Drawing and Professor of Medicine, included in it you can almost hear Leonardo thinking.

As an anatomist and chronicler of the structure of the human body, he is peerless — 'impeccable' barely does justice to his depiction of *The Superficial Anatomy of the Shoulder and Neck* or *The Vertebral Column* — a first in medical history, which has not been improved on significantly since — but the deeper he gets, under the skin, the less sure his touch, the less true to life the pictures become. There would have been major technical obstacles: 'material' for dissection was scarce, and there was no refrigeration. But there also seem to have been major cultural and intellectual obstacles that got in the way of verisimilitude, as Leonardo was constrained by the earlier teaching of Vitruvius and Galen, and also by concerns about public heterodoxy.

Take, for example, the extraordinary *Coinction of a Hemisected Man and Woman*. Self-evidently not drawn ex vivo, while Leonardo accurately depicts elements of pelvic anatomy, in other aspects his pen has reflected both his own thinking and the ancient beliefs of Plato and Hippocrates. A structure like a fallopian tube originates, correctly, in the uterus, but finds its way — erroneously, perhaps? — to the breast. There are tubular connections between the penis, spinal cord, and heart, and possibly with the cerebral ventricles. In the first of these 'misrepresentations' was Leonardo graphically hypothesising what we now know about the functions of oxytocin?

And, in the latter, was he simply unable to escape the long-held philosophical belief that human seed emanates from the soul or the spiritual part of the body, identified as the spinal cord?

Leonardo was also unable to shake off the ancient beliefs about blood passing through tiny invisible pores in the interventricular septum, despite having constructed a working model of the aortic valve that, if correctly interpreted, would have put him 130 years ahead of William Harvey. His experiments on the structure of the cerebral ventricles of an ox might have led him to overturn conventional beliefs about their function, but he found it too challenging to dispel received wisdom when he had nothing to replace it with.

There is much to ponder, and much to wonder over and enjoy, in this elegantly produced volume. I can't think of a better collaboration than Michael and Stephen Farthing, who are brothers, to dissect the tensions in Leonardo's work between the empirical and the imagined, between myth and reality.

The drawings in this book were part of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana (a historic library in Milan) and were acquired during the reign of Charles II, and are now held at Windsor Castle. More than 200 of these drawings are now on display at the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London, in an exhibition called *Leonardo da Vinci: A Life in Drawing* until 13 October.

The show is supplemented by lectures, workshops, and private tours of the drawings, details of which can be found on the Royal Collections Trust website (<https://www.rct.uk/>).

This exhibition is part of a nationwide celebration marking the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death. A selected group of 12 drawings has already been exhibited in 11 other cities across the UK, and 80 drawings, the largest group ever assembled in Scotland, will be on show in the Queen's Gallery, at the Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, between 22 November 2019 and 15 March 2020.

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