

BOOK REVIEW

Letters to a Young Doctor: Exploring and Surviving a Career in Medicine

by Dr Hilali Noordeen
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Dr Hilali Noordeen, a consultant orthopaedic and spine surgeon at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in London has written an insightful book – combining his memoir and musings on the philosophy of medicine.

The opening chapter chronicles his life as a medical student in Oxford University. His failures in anatomy and later on in orthopaedics were seminal events which subsequently led to a career in orthopaedic surgery.

Some of what he writes is reminiscent of what we had experienced during medical training:

During a tutorial - “He was shocked to the core at being asked what he thought after having regurgitated what he had read, and found himself stumbling, unable to provide an original answer”.

The back pain clinics were dreaded by orthopaedic trainees - “As the afternoon wore on, all those providing the service slid lower behind their consulting desk, weighed down by patient after patient with seemingly unending back pain, showing no sign of remission”.

He fears the physical alienation in the virtual world of social media and worries that students studying long hours online will lose their social skills. He emphasises that “medicine is as much an art as it is a science”. Verbal and non-verbal communication is an art needing empathy and the ability to recognise nuances in the facial expressions and body language of a patient.

Surgical training in the United Kingdom has changed over the years. With increasing specialisation, it is now routine for a spine surgeon to have an “approach surgeon” perform the initial surgery in exposing the spine. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has taken a toll on junior doctors resulting in burnout from treating the overwhelming number of patients. Most of the medical students or young doctors who quit do so because medicine did not meet their expectations.

He criticises medicine for becoming more business-like and algorithm driven. Health administration has become more bureaucratic. The culture of command and control appoints compliant individuals who would not challenge any top down directives. Aspiring doctors may find the narrative on hospital management heavy going.

Noordeen gave a poignant reminder on the importance of work-life balance. He had colleagues who were dedicated surgeons becoming destitute after breakdowns in their marriages.

The final chapter concludes with a plea for self-reflection and spirituality. He reminds us that the compassionate care of patients is the heart of the medical profession.

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