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Doctors' stories: This Is Going To Hurt, Also Human, Tell Me I'm Okay

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Also Human, The Inner Lives of Doctors

When American novelist Michael Crichton was in his final year at Harvard Medical School, he developed numbness and tingling in his arms and legs that a neurologist thought could possibly be a symptom of multiple sclerosis.

In his essay *Quitting Medicine*, Crichton revealed that the threat of debilitating illness made him re-evaluate how he wanted to spend his life. We might not have had *Jurassic Park* and dozens of other books if Crichton had believed a psychiatrist that his symptoms were due to psychological distress.

Medicine is undoubtedly the noblest of professions, but the levels of burnout, depression and suicide reported among its students and practitioners is alarming. Doctors go above and beyond in their care of us, but who takes care of them?

Former junior doctor turned comedian and screenwriter Adam Kay turned the diaries he secretly scribbled while working for Britain's National Health Service between 2004 and 2010 into a comedy act and then last year into his first book, *This is Going to Hurt*. This bestseller now has been released in paperback with a new introduction and additional diary entries.

Kay reflects that medical school did not remotely prepare him for the "Jekyll and Hyde" existence of a recently qualified doctor. He describes the day job as "manageable", but the night shifts as an "unrelenting nightmare" that makes Dante resemble Disney.

"You're a one-man, mobile, essentially untrained Accident & Emergency department, getting drenched in bodily fluids (not even the fun kind) ..."

Several diary entries start with the words "Moral Maze" or "Horror Story", while others are short, such as: "Prescribing a morning-after pill in A&E. The patient says, 'I slept with three guys last night. Will one pill be enough?'"

Kay's memoir is a great read and for me easily matched Bill Bryson's *Notes From a Small Island* for the number of laugh-out-loud moments. You don't even need to be medically inclined, as Kay explains the terminology in his informative and often humorous footnotes.

However, he does have some serious points to make in his book, which he wrote in response to Britain's junior doctors strike of 2016. He wanted the public to know that working weeks approaching 100 hours meant that the money paid to junior doctors was "utterly out of step with the level of responsibility".

I admire Kay's ability to strike the right balance between the silly and the serious; between hilarity and heartbreak.

The final diary entry describes a caesarean section, performed under his supervision, that went horribly wrong. The baby is dead and a hysterectomy is the only option to control heavy bleeding from the

mother's uterus. Afterwards, Kay attempts to write up the operation notes but instead starts to cry.

He was back at work the next day. He felt bereaved. He knew that he couldn't risk anything bad happening on his watch again, so after a few months he quit.

What Kay needed was to speak to someone such as occupational psychologist and author Caroline Elton, who has been supporting doctors for the past 20 years in two Britain-based roles. Elton's first book, *Also Human*, is a much-needed examination of the inner lives of doctors. It is based on hundreds of conversations and observations, as well as a thorough review of the literature from around the world.

This book is essential reading for anyone considering entering the medical profession, as well as for those planning their education and transitions, which Elton believes need to be managed much better.

In the opening pages, she shares an email from a medical student named Leo who sounds so distressed about sitting his final examinations that he is a suicide risk. Leo is worried he will "end up hurting someone else by accident or more likely drive [himself] to the edge".

Elton typically meets doctors who, like Leo, are facing a crisis. Her aim is to help them face challenges such as achieving work-life balance and dealing with exposure to patient suffering. She comments that her roles have afforded her an "insider's vantage point" on the profession. "I suspect it's a bit easier for doctors to admit to me that they're struggling at work than to have the same conversation with another doctor."

She says that stigma is still a real problem in the medical profession, so mental and physical illnesses are often underreported. Surgical theatres are still considered a "male bastion".

Elton advocates an "eyes wide open" approach to choosing a specialty from the sheer number available, which in Australia is 85.

She has counselled numerous clients whose career decisions have been influenced by an illness in a close family member, which in the case of Lola was a father who died of cancer. Lola lasted only six weeks in oncology because she "felt as if [she] was continually scratching open a wound", so she retrained as a general practitioner.

The stories of clients such as Leo and Lola bring Elton's book to life and support her central thesis that "whilst the demands of the job are exceptional, the person inhabiting the role of the doctor is, just like their patients, also human."

Retired sexual health physician David Bradford never wanted to become a doctor. In his moving and candid memoir, *Tell Me I'm Okay*, he reveals that his strict evangelical Christian parents informed him that medicine was "God's plan" for his life.

In a chance event, he gained a graduate medical job at Concord Repatriation Hospital in Sydney and an associated posting on an army base in Ingleburn, in Sydney's southwest. By May 1967, Bradford had signed up and was on a plane bound for the Vietnam War.

During his 12 months in Vietnam, he frequently diagnosed venereal disease among the Australian and American troops. He was adept at helping them overcome any sense of embarrassment or shame and knew he had found his calling.

In 1972, after returning from London armed with additional surgical qualifications, he met his future life partner, Michael. Bradford came out to his parents about his homosexuality and his medical specialty. Neither sat well with them; his mother told people that her son worked "in public health".

Bradford peppers his memoir with interesting stories about the patients he treated while working as director of the Melbourne Communicable Diseases Centre, "the gay boys, the sex workers, the carefree heterosexual youngsters who descended on the clinic in droves".

Michael would prove to be a vital support to Bradford after the first patient in Australia with AIDS, caused by the human immunodeficiency virus, was diagnosed in 1982.

Together, they provided friendship to the hundreds of patients who Bradford would ultimately lose to this disease before effective anti-HIV drugs became available from 1996 onwards.

This highly readable memoir provides an accurate account of this epidemic from its scary early days. Bradford's dedication and caring attitude shines through descriptions of the long days he spent making

house visits to infected patients throughout Victoria, often arriving home at 10pm.

One of the most harrowing experiences during his 46-year medical career was treating a dying AIDS patient at home while loved ones kept a bedside vigil lasting more than five days.

Tell Me I'm Okay is richer for being told from the dual perspective of a gay man and frontline doctor during the AIDS epidemic, when Bradford's patients became his life.

Doctors perform a nearly impossible job to the best of their abilities. Let those among your acquaintance know that they've always got someone to talk to.

As Kay stresses in his memoir: "Care for the carer. They are just as fragile as anyone."

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her debut book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

This Is Going To Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor

By Adam Kay

Picador, 280pp, \$18.99

Also Human: The Inner Lives of Doctors

By Caroline Elton

William Heineman, 372pp, \$35

Tell Me I'm Okay: A Doctor's Story

By David Bradford

Monash University Publishing, 226pp, \$29.95

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