

# DISSECTING ROOM

## The physician-as-scientist; the physician-as-shaman



### Do We Still Need Doctors?

John D Lantos. 1997. New York and London: Routledge.  
Pp 214. £17.99. ISBN 0-415-91852-9.

At first sight, *Do We Still Need Doctors* seems to be just another doctor-bashing horror story of modern medicine's failures, with a stupid title designed to scream from the bookshelves to attract a non-medical market with minds already made up. In reality, the book is more interesting than that, more thoughtful, more provocative, more informed, and written for doctors themselves. And it is also more difficult to pin down, to track a consistent thread of argument, to summarise, and ultimately to find an answer to the title's direct question.

At times I compared this book to *Medical Nemesis*, Ivan Illich's radical critique of 1975 with its sustained, scholarly, wide-ranging attack on technological medicine, and the ultimate indictment that industrialised medicine was the cause of ill-health—so-called “structural iatrogenesis”. Although some of the targets are similar, this book is different, less scholarly, less global. John Lantos is parochial, considering not even North America but only the US of A, with a blithe assumption that “we” and “our” both mean “American”. Where Lantos succeeds is in the personal. He tells of the death of his sister-in-law; the successes, failures, and disappointments of his GI-turned-physician father; his own intractable patients; his failed CPRs; the CPRs he wished had

failed; the tedium, banality, and emptiness of the conference circuit; the drug companies trying to buy favours; &c. And behind it all he continually thinks, reflects, feels, wonders, and asks what it is all for.

The failures of high-tech medicine with its often pointless, futile, and expensive prolongation of life, and the self-justifying expansion of a “metastasising” system already consuming 16% of the gross national product of the world's richest country, are well described. Medicine has come to be perceived not as a solution to problems but as the problem that needs a solution.”

Lantos begins with “[A] central question: Is the medical enterprise a rational, scientific and orderly endeavour?” If his answer is not clear it is because he sees the question as confused, its intentions mixed. Medicine indeed attempts to be rational only because it over-emphasises a science seen as merely rational and orderly, ignoring its social and moral core concerned with the nature of truth. More crucially, it isn't clear that science is all we really want from medicine. Lantos sees scientism as fatally undermining medicine; “When I, as a modern doctor, make a clinical decision for a particular patient in a particular situation, I need to integrate knowledge about biology, pharmacology and pathophysiology with knowledge about psychology, communication, economics, and sociology, and with beliefs about morality, loyalty, and friendship. Scientific knowledge is a part of my decision-making process but often not the greatest part”.

Science is seen as a modern overlay on the ancient profession of medicine (or cunning man or shaman or whatever), with the older skills and values being lost. On the continuum from “physician-as-scientist” to “physician-as-shaman”, most doctors are now too close to the former, caring requires the latter, and the two types are perhaps fundamentally incompatible. As Lantos so acutely puts it: “There will be people in pain who call for comfort . . . There will be people who reach the end of verifiable treatment algorithms but who don't want to die according to the palliative care protocols”. And they'll want real doctors, not scientists or technicians.

What characterises the physician-as-shaman? Lantos invokes a moral dimension, which is missing from modern medicine, from its practice, from its ethics, from its medical education, from its self-image, from its research, from its organisation, from its priorities. Symptomatic of it all are the randomised controlled trial and the meta-analysis, which for evidence-based medicine, are the only true cross of clinical effectiveness (unless, as in *The Lancet* a few weeks ago, they heretically suggest that homoeopathy might be effective . . .).

Lantos' book challenges most assumptions of modern medicine, provides an intelligent read for all doctors, who will recognise their own dilemmas, and would form an excellent basis for any medical ethics course. For those so committed to evidence-based medicine that they reach for their revolver when they hear words like “moral”, “shaman”, “experience”, or “caring”, Lantos throws down the ultimate challenge: “What if the scientific physician is not the best physician?”. Now that *would* make an interesting randomised controlled trial.

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