How We Do Harm, A Doctor Breaks Ranks About Being Sick in America


This book is a non-fictional piece written by Otis Webb Brawley, who is the chief medical officer and vice president of the American Cancer Society. In this book, Otis Webb Brawley revisits his past cases, experiences, and memories, from since he was a child up until the present day. He does this in order to point out the many faults in the American health care system. Specifically, he wants to make the point that sometimes doctors “Do Harm” rather than good, whether this is intentional or not. The problems that he brings into focus relate to the care that unlucky citizens without health insurance are forced to receive as well as the corruption of several doctors who take advantage of those patients who have health insurance. Additionally, he proposes some examples of ways to try to repair the broken health care system.

The book visits many locations across America, but it starts off at the Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. Although the patients who come to Grady without insurance are forced to wait an eternity to be seen and are not given access to the newest forms of treatments, Dr. Brawley argues that these patients may be receiving care from better, more honest, doctors than insured patients. The doctors at Grady (Dr. Brawley himself is one of them) know they are treating patients who cannot pay, and they are on a fixed salary. Patients with health insurance, and more money, see doctors who are paid-for-service and driven by greed. Therefore, they sometimes do not have their patients’ best interests in mind but rather their own. Otis Webb Brawley cites many examples of cases where doctors prescribed treatments to patients either when it was not necessary or when a safer treatment was available, just because it would make them more money. The unfortunate result of these incidents was a decrease in the quality of life, if not the death, of some patients.

Although he gives many examples of doctors acting in despicable ways, he also is sure to include some examples of excellent doctors who treat patients as they should be treated – with evidence-based medicine. This is the type of medicine that Dr. Brawley himself practices, where he looks at the current research and informs his patients of all the risks and rewards of every possible treatment. The corrupt doctors who are driven by greed prescribe the newest and most expensive drugs, while keeping patients in the dark about their treatment, regardless of whether these drugs are ineffective or unsafe.

Otis Webb Brawley makes a desperate cry for a complete overhaul of the corrupt medical system that is harming patients more than healing them. However, he is not optimistic about the possibility of a reform as the health care system is trending downhill. He attributes this to a lack of patient knowledge of current medical research, patients’ desire to seek out treatment for every illness, the rise of technology, and the powerful advertising of pharmaceutical companies. Thankfully, he does provide some ray of hope by giving examples of groups of patients who have come together to educate other patients on how to have an informed role in their own health care. It seems that he is trying to point out the fact that if the system is to be fixed, it must start from the ground up, with the patients themselves.

This book has many positive features. It is easy to read and it keeps the reader engaged by constantly introducing new stories and characters. It also appeals to all audiences. There is enough explanation and common terms so that a non-medical person can understand the book, but there is also enough scientific detail and intricacies about the health care system so that health care professionals can enjoy it as well. I really enjoyed the way Otis Webb Brawley introduced every one of his characters by providing the readers with some background information about their lives. This made it enjoyable when he referred back to these characters later on in the book because the reader already felt a connection to them. Finally, thanks to his use of pseudonyms, he was able to write about many interesting, controversial, and private cases while still maintaining patient confidentiality and anonymity. This allowed the readers to learn about some of the hidden flaws and secrets of the health care system.

There were some negative features about this book. I found it hard to follow the timeline since the author would jump back and forth between his childhood, his time in medical school, and his early and late professional life. Also, this book was extremely American-centric. As a Canadian with very little knowledge of the American health care system, I did not understand some of the intricacies and terms
associated with American health care insurance. Despite the fact that this book is tailored towards an American audience, it still has value to other readers as well. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in informing themselves about the dangers associated with health care systems. By reading this book, patients may be more inclined to inquire about their health care, by asking doctors the right questions, so that they can prevent themselves from being harmed by the system. I would also recommend this book to health care students and professionals because it may be an eye opener for them to see the flaws in the healthcare system. This book may encourage some people to try to do something to change the system for the better, and it would hopefully discourage others from trying to abuse the system because they would see the harm that it can do and that their wrongdoings are not going unnoticed.