

## BOOKS

## Medical pains

Dr. Frank Warsh's memoir, *The Flame Broiled Doctor*, paints a funny, compassionate and relatable picture of life as a Canadian doctor

BY TRISTAN BRONCA

I have a bit of a confession: After working at the *Medical Post* for nearly five years, I don't actually know what the average doctor—to whatever extent these things can be “averaged”—does every day. I have an idea, sure. I've talked to perhaps hundreds of them (you). I've visited offices, sat in on consultations, and tagged along on home visits. I know there are long stretches of drudgery after hours, forms to be filled out, and tons of other odd jobs that no one who's never run a clinic would ever think of. I've reported on problems with regulators, administrators, and unruly patients but the fact is, I don't really know what it's like to deal with any of them.

I mention this because in the time I've covered this profession, the closest I think I've ever come to really getting it was reading a book; namely, Dr. Frank Warsh's memoir, *The Flame Broiled Doctor*.

Dr. Warsh is an investigating coroner and former family doctor who now lives in London, Ont. He's also a friend of the *Medical Post* (which is why I'll make no attempt to hide my bias in this review). His articles are always thoughtful and profane. His is a voice that will resonate with any Canadian doctor who has ever been sold a spoonful of crap and told it was caviar.

This book is further evidence of Dr. Warsh's skill as a storyteller. Over some 200-odd pages, it's an effortless

and constantly entertaining read. It begins with his boyhood reflections on his career choice and quickly moves into the early intimations that maybe medicine might not be right for him: From the debilitating stomach pains he suffered under the stresses of medical school, to the dressing-downs he received from his preceptors about his bedside manner.

Still, there are at least a few reasons

he stuck with medicine, about which Dr. Warsh is refreshingly honest. Being a self-professed wiseass, he has no qualms admitting one thing he'll really miss about daily practice is the stories. They almost invariably make the doctor the most interesting person at a cocktail party.

The book hosts a cast of aptly named characters such as Dr. Rolex, “whose watch came courtesy of a drug company, back when that sort of thing

still happened”; Philosopher Phil, “a chap with alcoholic dementia”; and Mr. Johnson, whose “foreskin problem” will haunt my dreams for a very long time. These stories, I imagine, make up a good chunk of Dr. Warsh's cocktail party fodder, but they also illuminate corners of medicine that would otherwise remain invisible to outsiders (I, for one, had no idea why orthopedic surgeons incurred higher malpractice fees before, nor would I have cared until Dr. Warsh made me realize it could one day affect my chances of getting a

surgery that would bring me desperately needed relief).

But interspersed in these are other stories. These are the heavier ones. The ones that lead to career-shaping insights. The ones that expose the unrelenting burdens that turn healthy doctors into the flame-broiled kind. There are many of these moments in the book but to avoid spoiling the others, I'll only mention one: Erica.

Erica was a hypochondriac and one of the final patients Dr. Warsh saw in family practice before he ultimately left. In her final visit, she walked in with a stack of tests she wanted Dr. Warsh to have another look at, then utterly berated him for being condescending and dismissive in the years he treated her. Dr. Warsh understood she was dealing with a pretty distressing sense of abandonment at his leaving. He had been expecting the outburst.

It was in this moment that an unusual thought occurred to Dr. Warsh: This is what it means for a doctor to play god. He was clear he wasn't talking about the all-knowing, all-powerful man in the sky who decides who lives and dies, but more like a primitive god, possessed of the same human weaknesses, but whose vain or vengeful decisions in that moment could make a massive difference in another's life. If he documented the visit in a way to make himself look good, he knew no one would believe Erica's word over his. If he referred her to a “cold-hearted prick” instead of a “kind and sweet” consultant, as many doctors might feel she deserved, that would be his prerogative (for the record, he did not). “It was a power I had no interest in wielding ever again,” Dr. Warsh wrote.

I may not know much about the practice of medicine, but it seems like every good doctor possess that kind of awareness. It never garners any applause or recognition, yet it can alter or inform any decision. And it's precisely this awareness that makes these doctors uniquely vulnerable to the stresses that burn at them day after day. **MP**

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