

JONATHAN EDLOW, *THE DEADLY DINNER PARTY: & OTHER MEDICAL DETECTIVE STORIES*

Yale University Press ISBN 978 0 300 12558 0 pp245

By *Miriam Fine-Goulden*

Stories of sleuths solving mysteries have long captured the public's imagination. As the popularity of the television series *House, M.D.* demonstrates, tales of medical intrigue unravelled by a thoughtful and perceptive doctor provide a winning formula. This compilation of bite-sized real-life accounts of fascinating diagnostic dilemmas and the medical reasoning that is applied to effect their resolution is indeed a gripping read, illustrating how the truth can be even more absorbing than fiction.

In *The Deadly Dinner Party & Other Medical Detective Stories*, Edlow, vice-chair of emergency medicine and associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, cites *The Medical Detectives* by Berton Roueché and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes* as inspirations. The book is also strongly reminiscent of the non-fiction of the neurologist Oliver Sacks, as the remarkable patients in each form the basis of a sympathetic, educational and engaging narrative.

Like every good medical drama, each story centres on a patient, starting with a personal tale, as well as first-hand accounts from all characters integral to the plot. As the medical history is revealed bit by bit and the investigation proceeds, Edlow provides an eloquent and comprehensible commentary on the pathophysiology of the condition, whilst delineating the reasoning of the diagnostician and demonstrating the role and scope of the epidemiologist. He also weaves into each case a wealth of historical, sociological, and sometimes political and geographical information. This is achieved so artfully and fits into the story so seamlessly that it is as enthralling as it is instructive.

A quotation attributed to Harvey Cushing, the American neurosurgeon, reminds us that "A physician is obligated to consider more than a diseased organ, more even than the whole man – he must view the man in his world." The key to solving these mysteries lies in appreciating the interaction between the person and their environment. In the first chapter, 'Human meets pathogen', unusual and unexpected microbes wreak havoc on their hosts before being identified and tracked down by diligent and observant sleuths. In 'The external environment' we see how careful consideration of the home and workplace can reveal vital clues and, as those of who work with children are aware, that a parent is often able to discover facts that have evaded even the most thorough medical assessment. The final chapter, 'The internal milieu', follows suit, describing cases of sharp-witted medics who recognise and understand the symptoms of disease in their nearest and dearest.

The appeal of these cases lies in the educational and entertaining journey we are taken on in deciphering the medical conundrums; intellectual curiosity is piqued with suspense. They also reignite the passion for a good, old-fashioned case history; each of the cases in the book is solved by meticulous history-taking and thorough groundwork, not from the results of sophisticated diagnostic tests. Many of these cases date back over a decade or two, when such tests were not widely available. One story relates how a conscientious medical student successfully diagnosed a condition that had eluded and baffled doctors, by taking an exhaustive history and spotting clues that others had missed.

In today's world of evidence-based medicine, in which the multi-centre placebo-controlled randomised controlled trial reigns supreme, and many of our diagnostic pathways are protocol-based, writers like Edlow remind us of the fascination, charm and utility of the case report. These uncommon conditions and unusual presentations require sound clinical skills combined with acumen – what Edlow refers to as the "hunch" or "gut feeling" of the doctor with experience and good

judgement – achieved by paying attention to, and learning from, individual patients. To quote Oliver Sacks, ‘There is only one cardinal rule: one must always *listen* to the patient’.

It is not only Edlow’s masterful storytelling that brings these tales to life, but also his humanity – his interest in the patient behind the disease. Reading this collection has not only made me better informed, it has also made me a more thoughtful and attentive doctor. As Edlow states, ‘Part of every doctor’s job is to solve mysteries’; many “whodunits” in clinical practice are simple open-and-shut cases, but others can only be solved by careful consideration of the characters, plot and setting.

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MSc Advanced Paediatrics
Institute of Child Health