

# Bioethics Book Club



## **We All Fall Down**

**By Daniel Kalla**

*Simon & Shuster, 2019*

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### **Summary<sup>1</sup>**

A woman working at a building site in Genoa falls critically ill, and is found to have the plague. Alana Vaughn, a NATO infectious disease expert is summoned to Genoa by her ex-lover Nico, who is a physician at the hospital where the woman was brought in. Soon Alana is working with her WHO counterpart, Byron Menke, in their hunt to find patient zero and to stop the disease that turns out to be the Black Death from spreading. A medieval script from an eight-hundred-year-old monastery may hold the secret to defeating the present-day outbreak.

### **Ethical Issues**

Rationing of scarce resource during an epidemic

Privacy

Resource allocation during an epidemic

Euthanasia

Duty to disclose

Confidentiality

Conscientious objection

Stigma

### **Discussion questions:**

- What part of the story made the biggest impression on you and why?
- Kalla's book was published in 2019, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the story they are dealing with a known disease, with treatment options, provided that the infection is detected early. Discuss from an ethics perspective the similarities and differences between dealing with a known disease, and a new virus, like COVID-19, which has not been seen in humans before.
  - What are the relevant ethical considerations to consider when deciding public health measures in response to the outbreak of a deadly, but known infectious disease?
  - How do these considerations differ in the case of a novel deadly virus like COVID-19?
- In certain circumstances (like the one described on page 354), doctors have a duty to disclose patient information. How might disclosure of confidential patient information impact the doctor-patient relationship?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from publisher's summary.

- Does an epidemic or pandemic shift our ethical obligations around confidentiality?
- What harms come from disclosure of confidential patient information during an epidemic or pandemic?
- The following discussion around resource allocation plays out on page 374:

“Alana empathizes with both of them. Such life-and-death rationing decisions reminds her of missions with the WHO, where she was also forced to play God due to limited resources. “Why not share it Byron?” she suggests. “At least between Nico’s patient and the little boy?” “Yes”, Nico nods rapidly. “Maybe even two-thirds for the woman and one third for the boy? “And what if they both die having been underdosed?” Byron asks. “The at least you would have given both of them a chance!” Nico cries.

What do you think about their decision to share the antibodies between the two patients? Do you agree with their approach?

- How would you have allocated the resource based on the information about the patients on page 374-375?
- What are the values and ethical principles that guide your decision?
- Do you think bedside allocation is the right approach under these circumstances? Why or why not?

**Discuss the following passages from the book:**

P. 31. “Still, why not just work here for a few days?” Alana suggests. A week at the most. Until we know the risk is completely gone.” Zanetti squints at her. “The other doctors, from the government –.” “Public Health”, Nico offers. ‘*Si!* Public Health. They assured us there was no more risk. Besides, my dear, a week...” Zanetti flutters a hand up and over his head. “You have no idea what that might cost.”

P.132. “We have to release his name and photo to the media.”

“It’s too early Byron. Even Sergio agrees. And he’s the lead Italian agent on this.”

“What’s the point of waiting?”

“One, we still don’t know if Yasin is involved. And two, if he is the source, publicizing his name might only spook him and make him and his network that much harder to trace.”

“We don’t have to announce he’s a terrorist. Only that he might be infected.”

“People will put it together. Imagine the fallout.”

P. 291. “I suddenly understood what he was asking of me. I backed a step away from the bed.

“No Jacob”, I said. “You cannot ask this of me. [...]. “If I had the strength and courage to suffocate myself I would do so”, he said. “I am ready to die. I should be dead. Only you can help me, Raphael.”

P. 353. “And he just took his word for that” Alana asks. Sergio speaks to the doctor, whose waving grows even more frantic. Sergio turns back to Alana. “Dr. Gianini says he sometimes sees more than fifty patients a day, I believe him. Our medical system...” he grunts in disdain.”

