

Bioethics Book Club



Twelve Patients: Life and Death at Bellevue Hospital by Eric Manheimer, MD. Grand Central Publishing, 2013

Summary¹

Dr. Eric Manheimer is the former medical director of the Bellevue Hospital in New York. In this memoir of his time at Bellevue he tells the stories of twelve individual patients with very different backgrounds. You'll get to know Tanisha, a young teen with PTSD, Jeffrey, an unhoused person with mental illness, Arnie, who is living with addiction, and many more. The stories describe the individual patients' challenges in life, which include living in poverty, illegal immigration, homelessness, lack of health care and more. In addition to describing the many societal issues and political circumstances that contribute to each patient's circumstances, the book also paints a picture of the stretched- to-capacity hospitals in New York. As the book unfolds, Manheimer is diagnosed with cancer and is forced to tackle this along with his struggle to save other people's lives.

Ethical Issues

Access to health care

Living at risk

Inequality

Resource allocation

Addiction

Trust

Disclosure of adverse events

Duty to report

Over-treatment and over-testing

Social determinants of health

Discussion questions:

- In 'The Unloved Woman,' Alicia goes through multiple tests that all come back normal. Manheimer later recognises that her physical symptoms may be the result of somatization of psychic suffering. In your opinion, what are the factors that may contribute to over testing and/or over treatment of patients like Alicia?
- In the story about Trauma Detroit, the medical team makes a mistake that could easily have caused the patient to die. There is discussion about whether to disclose the near miss

¹ Partly adapted from publisher's summary.

incident to the patient. How would you decide whether a ‘near miss incident’ should be disclosed to the patient? What criteria would you use in your decision-making?

- In the story about Jeffrey, Dr. Mahendra and Dr. Manheimer struggle with triaging at a stretched-to-capacity psychiatric emergency department. Lack of access to mental health services continue to be a problem for patients in many countries, despite increased political awareness of the need for allocation of more resources in this area of health care. Why do you think that is the case?
- In ‘The Unloved Woman,’ the team reports Alicia’s situation to Child Protection Services.
 - What was your reaction to the teams reflections around the need to report Alicia to Child Protection Services?
 - What do you think of the plan that the team suggests in order to help Alicia keep her daughter in her own care? (Page 310 on top of the page).
- In the story ‘Four Generations,’ Manheimer discovers that four generations of the patient’s family have diabetes, in part because of lifestyle choices. On page 274 Manheimer reflects, “Were the members of this multigenerational family victims of their own irresponsible behaviour, and inability to make the “right” health decisions for themselves and their kids?” He continues: “What’s the difference between this kind of addiction and the cultivated addition to nicotine, cocaine, crystal meth, or heroin, for that matter?”
 - What is your answer to Manheimer’s questions?
 - What are some of the external factors that may contribute to people’s food choices?

Discuss the following passages from the book:

- “As far as my children went, I had to ask them for forgiveness. Then accept their anger, their rage, and endure it as part of who I am and what I had done to them. I hurt them, I put them at risk. What does forgiveness even mean? As someone said, it’s impossible to forgive because even by saying the word we bring back into focus all the harm we’ve done.” (Page 133)
- “The patient goes to the doctor and, hopefully, gets the diagnosis. Many doctors stop there after running some tests or prescribing some medication. Or they kick the ball to another specialist. For the patient, though, this label has a real function.” (Page 289).
- “Alicia, something doesn’t add up. Your tests are fine. You are healthy from every point of view. Yet I feel something is going on. Do you have an idea what it might be?” The visits reassured her. I had stopped doing more than taking my stethoscope out of my coat pocket, making a quick reassuring check of blood pressure, heart, and lungs, and listening. Low tech and high touch.” (Page 293)
- “I want to get out of here and be left alone. No shelter, no apartment, no home. Just leave me alone and let me get out of here. You pretend to be well intentioned, but you’re jailers. Really that’s what you are.” (Page 222)
- “Government regulation, the mantra plays out, stifles the great American job machine and its innovation engine. Its most recent iteration has been the self-serving pre-emptive

laws called collectively the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act. These laws have been adopted by half of the states and ban lawsuits against the fast-food industry. A tactic the tobacco industry wished it had in place before it paid out billions in settlements. Call it second-generation tactical maturation. The strategies from one decades-long engagement are older and a lot wiser when it comes to limiting liability, Congree, the Supreme Court, and the consuming public.” (Page 187)