

Book Reviews

One Nation: What We All Can Do to Save America's Future, by Ben Carson, M.D., softcover, 256 pp, \$8.99, ISBN-13: 978-1595231222, Sentinel, 2015.

In this book, written for the general public, pediatric neurosurgeon and Republican Presidential candidate Dr. Ben Carson conducts an extended conversational monologue about America's future, in three parts: "Causes of Disunity and Decline," "Solutions," and "Who We Are." The book is easy to read, but it is deceptively simple. Nothing in this book is brain surgery, or even rocket science, but it is an honest analysis of what is going on in the United States of America.

Each chapter opens with an apposite quotation from the Book of Proverbs. The chapters conclude with four questions or suggestions for the reader. Those readers capable of sincere self-reflection will find something of value therein. Others may find some of the suggestions corny, but the audience for which this book was written includes many of us who may never have considered these thoughtful questions and suggestions.

It is refreshing to read such a book without the usual excess verbiage, circumlocutions, and dodges. In the course of a lifetime of hearing things from politicians that blatantly counter reality, I have learned that whenever that happens, there is an underlying dishonest agenda. I have not had to wonder whether Carson says things because of bribes from Saudi Arabians or Iranians or businesses tied to those nations, organized labor, the National Education Association, or some other group of parasites on the taxpayers. He is actually one of us.

Problems Carson identifies and discusses include the recent decline of unencumbered freedom of expression; freely chosen ignorance, especially of

history; lawyers in power who want to win fights rather than solve problems; the decline of morality, common sense, and manners; an elite class in media and politics that manipulates ideas; bigotry (when was the last time you heard someone even notice that men are often portrayed in mass media as buffoons?); dirty fights in politics; and enslaving future generations with debt.

His suggested solutions include some obvious things, offered under the headings "Pushing Back," "Respectful Disagreement," "The Art of Compromise," "Becoming Informed," "Wisdom and Knowledge," and "My Brother's Keeper."

One of the things I like about this book is the "emperor has no clothes" nature of Carson's observations. He clearly explains such things as the way in which socialism kills charity; the pernicious effect of what the statist call compassion, which maintains people in an impoverished state; and the value of minimum-wage jobs. Many Americans have never thought about these things, or have imbibed their ideas from the dominant media. Carson gives them something to think about in *One Nation*.

It is difficult to convey the pleasure of reading advice such as "Don't Replace Your Brain with a Computer." We all know that thousands of people have small computer-telephones with which they could teach themselves history, mathematics, genetics, and geography, but instead they are "well versed in the minor characters of popular sitcoms." This book is enriched with discussions of things that are rarely recognized or discussed, such as the critical difference between knowledge and wisdom. Carson illustrates this by observing that the furor over "offending" people is misplaced, since taking offense is a choice, and the "offended" feign their sense of offense in order to shift

discussion away from the matter at hand. Instead of the furious contention over "voter ID" in the U.S. as some kind of "discrimination," he tells us that he has asked people all over the world how they prevent voter fraud in their elections. Answer: voter ID.

As far as taxes are concerned, Carson gives credit for compassion to those who think that people with low incomes should pay no income tax, but he points out that serious problems arise when a person who pays nothing has the right to vote and determine what other people must pay. Also, younger generations, wallowing in ignorance, live in a nation where the currency is backed by nothing but the good name of America.

One observation I would like to see made: amid all the anguish about school shootings and other horrifying occurrences in recent American history, it is not surprising that this is happening after two or three generations have been raised with a culture, implanted in their minds from infancy, originating from sordid movies and TV shows instead of from the positive values of Western Civilization.

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Big Medicine: The Cost of Corporate Control and How Doctors and Patients Working Together Can Rebuild a Better System, by Elaina George, M.D., hardcover, 192 pp, \$29.99, ISBN-13: 978-0984955206, St. Paul, Minn., Alethos Press, 2015.

This book references the dramatically partisan split (all Democrats for, all Republicans against) in the final 2010 vote for the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act," now called ACA. Dr. George shows the untoward consequences of implementing "ObamaCare" by decreasing the personalization of

medical care, actually limiting access to physicians for millions of people, and significantly increasing the administrative cost of providing medical services in the United States.

As George explains, ACA limits patient access to independent physicians because solo and small practices simply cannot now afford to treat millions of ACA-eligible poor and middle-class patients who have been enrolled in state-federal Medicaid programs. Allowable fees are simply too low to allow independent doctors to keep their practices afloat when they depend on Medicaid (and Medicare) dollars. As a result, despite the fact that more people in the U.S. now may have some form of third-party “healthcare” coverage, as touted by some politicians, “ObamaCare” has in fact shifted money from the care of poor and middle-class Americans to the coffers of public safety-net hospitals, large (and ever-consolidating) health insurance companies, hospital-clinic systems, and burgeoning government bureaucracies. Administrative costs are escalating. Patients are lining up at emergency departments for routine medical treatment.

The chapter about “Big Data” explains the folly of expensive government/insurance data collections, data mining, arcane or irrelevant treatment guidelines, and arbitrary medical necessity criteria. These too often discourage artful, personalized treatment and care planning based on individual patient histories, examinations, and patient/family interactions. Given very real threats to patient privacy and care depersonalization with an overemphasis on data collection, ACA creates an ethical dilemma for doctors trying to abide by the Oath of Hippocrates, George points out.

As doctors become employees of ever-larger organizations, they replace their loyalty to patients with obedience to their hiring organizations. Attention to compulsively inputting the electronic health record (EHR) information often dominates their attention during patient consultations, and compliance with documentation and pay-for-

performance criteria is based on EHR entries.

George shows that independent physicians in America today are indeed faced with a dilemma. Either they give up their professional autonomy and patient advocacy, or withdraw from all third-party (insurance) reimbursement systems in order to remain in practice. There are growing direct-pay and cash-practice markets for physician services in America. But to what extent will poor, middle-class, and elderly (Medicare) patients lose access to these independent physicians and small group practices? Unless ACA is changed significantly, they surely will.

We do not have a true medical or health insurance marketplace in the U.S., and we need one. Who asks what care will cost? “Obamacare” state and federal insurance “exchanges” offer surprisingly little variation in coverage (for example contraception for Catholic nuns). Nearly the sole economic question is: what is the insurance deductible for the Bronze, Silver, or Gold plan? Gold plans are going to be taxed as “Cadillac” plans. A central theme of the book is that with insurance deductibles now reaching thousands of dollars a year, the costs to average middle-class families for private-sector health insurance are dramatically rising, making care more unaffordable.

George reminds us that ultimately medicine is about the needs and welfare of patients. And ultimately no one is better able to make both medical and economic decisions than patients in partnership with their trusted physicians. This fine book helps show how to empower patients.

[The hardcover book is available at <http://alethospress.com>, and the e-book from Kindle, Nook, and Kobo.]

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Medicare’s Victims: How the U.S. Government’s Largest Health Care Program Harms Patients and Impairs Physicians, by David Hogberg, softcover, 336 pp, \$14.99, ISBN-13: 978-0692415320, National Center for Public Policy Research, 2015.

Imagine running a corporation with many employees who have little incentive to do things well. In *Medicare’s Victims*, David Hogberg paints a picture of a highly bureaucratic Medicare system that is not responsive to the pleas of those who count on it for medical care or for payment for services rendered.

Politics play a great role in Medicare’s daily functioning, and Hogberg tells story after story of patients, physicians, and nurses who have voiced their frustration when things go wrong. He writes, “Medicare can be used by powerful political interests to squash smaller competition.... Physicians who innovate in ways that threaten large, politically connected medical providers will see politicians try to drive them out of business.”

Hogberg believes that medical decisions are best left with patients and their physicians, “since they have the greatest incentive to make correct decisions about their medical care given that they are the ones who will pay the greatest cost if wrong decisions are made. Putting those decisions in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats—that is, in the hands of people who pay little or no cost for being wrong—is a recipe of bad outcomes and, on occasion, disaster.”

Medicare’s Victims is not a technical treatise filled with graphs and pie charts, but a readable book that enables us all to identify with those whom the system is hurting. Hogberg makes the case for overhauling this dysfunctional system, which results in poor outcomes at unsustainable cost.

As we enter another Presidential campaign—in which one side advocates government control of all medical care while the other champions leaving money in patients’ hands so they can choose wisely—this book helps frame the debate.

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