

Review

Nothing personal: disturbing undercurrents in cancer care

Mitzi Blennerhassett

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Mitzi Blennerhassett's prize winning narrative describes in vivid detail her personal journey with cancer, from its first stirrings, to her experiences with the illness and its treatment as well as her interactions with the health service over almost two decades. This is a beautifully written book, styled in a natural mix of prose, poetry and discussion points, which provides a rare insight into the thoughts of someone who can express their innermost perceptions and feelings as she reflects on her own condition, her exchanges – whether good (some), bad (often), or indifferent (at times) – with the health service and ultimately her conviction that the practice of health care and experiences for cancer sufferers can be improved.

If the quality of cancer care is to be built on a triad of effectiveness, safety and patient experience, it is this last element that is least accessible to the caring professions, unless writers like Mitzi share their accounts

with us. Fortunately, she does it in a way that is readable, honest and challenging but also full of hope that things can and will improve.

Karol Sikora's foreword describes the privilege of hearing such a personal account of cancer and the lessons that this can afford other cancer sufferers but also doctors, nurses, other health professionals and students. It is not surprising to me that the best learning about how we care for our patients come, not from experts but from patients themselves.

The most important lesson for me is that we need to continually develop and improve our understanding and skills of how to communicate better, more honestly and with real regard for our patients' intelligence and dignity. This remarkable book recently won 1st prize in the Medical Journalists' Association Open Book Awards. It should be on the essential reading list for those striving to improve the quality of care for cancer and to understand and improve the experience of their patients more generally.

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