

Doctors Tell All – And It's Not Good  
Meghan O'Rourke  
The Atlantic, November 2014

Meghan. O'Rourke is a writer and poet who has suffered with an obscure autoimmune disorder for over a decade. Her reflections on American medicine are worth reading. This article is available full free text.

The following are a few excerpts from the text of this somewhat long, but important and lucid, article.

This essay is about why it has become so difficult for so many doctors and patients to communicate with each other. Ours is a technologically proficient but emotionally deficient and inconsistent medical system that is best at treating acute, not chronic, problems: for every instance of expert treatment, skilled surgery, or innovative problem-solving, there are countless cases of substandard care, overlooked diagnoses, bureaucratic bungling, and even outright antagonism between doctor and patient. For a system that invokes "patient-centered care" as a mantra, modern medicine is startlingly inattentive – at times actively indifferent – to patients needs. To my surprise, I have now learned that patients aren't alone in feeling that doctors are failing them. Behind the scenes, many doctors feel the same way. A crop of recent books was a fascinating and disturbing ethnographic of the opaque land of medicine, told by participant-observers wearing white coats.

Few of us have a clear idea of how truly disillusioned many doctors are with a system that has shifted profoundly over the past four decades. These inside accounts should be compulsory reading for doctors, patients, and legislators alike.\*

Healthcare in the United States operates predominately on a fee-for-service basis which rewards doctors for doing as much as possible, rather than for providing the best care possible.

Studies estimate that today's doctors spend just 12 to 17% of their days with patients. The rest of the time is devoted to processing forms, reviewing lab results, maintaining electronic medical records, dealing with other staff.

Each time I had surgery, I had to push for what seemed like a basic right – having a family member with me as I came to. I still remember trying to tell

a nurse, my brain blurred by a waning anesthetic, that research proved the pain-reducing benefits of holding a loved-one's hand.

Without being fully aware of it, what I really wanted all along was a doctor trained in a different system, who understood that a conversation was as important as a prescription; a doctor to whom healing mattered as much as state-of-the-art surgery did.

This approach is described in great detail in *God's Hotel: The Doctor, Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* by Victoria Sweet. Sweet discusses an old form of medicine called "slow medicine." Slow medicine, Sweet trenchantly argues isn't an outmoded, soulful indulgence. It might actually be a form of efficiency: more accurate diagnoses and effective low-tech treatments help the system save money and results in fewer malpractice suits.

Here is a doctor saying what patients intuitively know: being sick is draining, healing takes time, and strong medicine often has strong side-effects.

Medicine today values intervention far more than it values care. In *Being Mortal*, Gawande writes that for a clinician, nothing is more threatening to who you think you are than a patient with a problem you cannot solve.

In the course of our lives, most of us will urgently need care, sometimes when we least expect it. Currently we must seek it in a system that excels at stripping our medical shepherds of their humanity, leaving them shells of the doctors (and people) they want to be.

I used to think that change was necessary for the sake of the patients. Now I see that it's necessary for the doctor's sake, too.

The books that O'Rourke studied to form her conclusions include:

**\* Reading List:**

Atul Gawande:, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*  
Terrence Holt, *Internal Medicine: A Doctor's Stories*  
Sandeep Juahara, *Doctored: The Disillusionment of an American Physician*  
Danielle Ofri, *What Doctors Feel: How Emotions Affect the Practice of medicine*

Baron Learner, *The Good Doctor: A Father, A Son, and the Evolution of Medical Ethics*

Jack Cochran and Charles Kenny: *The Doctor Crisis: How Physicians Can and Must Lead the Way to Better Health Care*

Victoria Sweet: *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine*