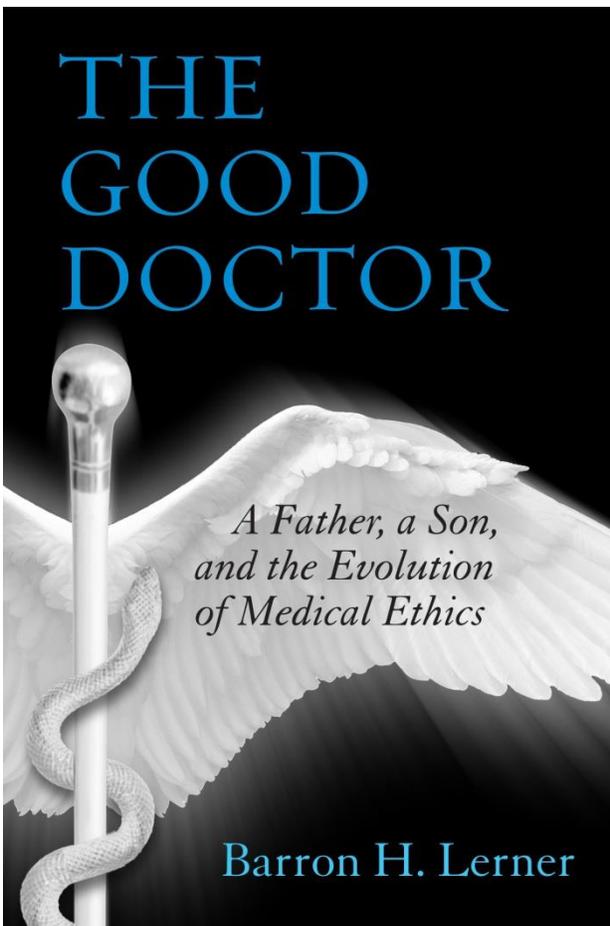


The Good Doctor
A Father, a Son, and the Evolution of Medical Ethics

By Barron H. Lerner



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About the Book

As a practicing physician and longtime member of his hospital's ethics committee, Dr. Barron Lerner thought he had heard it all. But in the mid-1990s, his father, an infectious diseases physician, told him a stunning story: he had physically placed his body over an end-stage patient who had stopped breathing, preventing his colleagues from performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation, even though CPR was the ethically and legally accepted thing to do. Over the next few years, the senior Dr. Lerner tried to speed the deaths of his seriously ill mother and mother-in-law to spare them further suffering.

These stories angered and alarmed the younger Dr. Lerner—an internist, historian of medicine, and bioethicist—who had rejected physician-based paternalism in favor of informed consent and patient autonomy. *The Good Doctor* is a fascinating and moving account of how Dr. Lerner came to terms with two very different images of his father: a revered clinician, teacher, and researcher who always put his patients first, but also a physician willing to “play God,” opposing the very revolution in patients' rights that his son was studying and teaching to his own medical students.

But the elder Dr. Lerner's journals, which he had kept for decades, showed the son how the father's outdated paternalism had grown out of a fierce devotion to patient-centered medicine, which was rapidly disappearing. And they raised questions: Are paternalistic doctors just relics, or should their expertise be used to overrule patients and families that make ill-advised choices? Does the growing use of personalized medicine—in which specific interventions may be best for specific patients—change the calculus between autonomy and paternalism? And how can we best use technologies that were invented to save lives but now too often prolong dying? In an era of high-tech medicine, spiraling costs, and health-care reform, these questions could not be more relevant.

As his father slowly died of Parkinson's disease, Barron Lerner faced these questions both personally and professionally. He found himself being pulled into his dad's medical care, even though he had criticized his father for making medical decisions for his relatives. Did playing God—at least in some situations—actually make sense? Did doctors sometimes “know best”?

A timely and compelling story of one family's engagement with medicine over the last half century, *The Good Doctor* is an important book for those who treat illness—and those who struggle to overcome it.

About the Author



Barron H. Lerner is the author of four previous books on medicine and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*' *Well* column, *TheAtlantic.com*, *Huffington Post*, and several blogs. He lives in Westchester County, New York, and is a bioethicist, historian of medicine, and internist at New York University's Langone School of Medicine.

Praise and Reviews

“Barron Lerner’s marvelous book—a deeply intimate story about his father and the practice of medicine—touches on some of the most profound issues in medicine today: autonomy, medical wisdom, empathy, paternalism, and the evolving roles of the doctor and patient. This is one of the most thoughtful and provocative books that I have read in a long time, and I suspect that generations of doctors and patients will find it just as thought provoking.”

—Siddhartha Mukherjee, MD, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*

“*The Good Doctor* poses a fundamental riddle faced by every historian: How can we question the decisions and attitudes of our forebears without having experienced the contexts that shaped them? It makes for a particularly compelling discussion when the players are father and son, sharing as their lives’ work an ethically charged, ever-changing profession.”

—Katie Hafner, *The New York Times*

Read Full Review: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/health/the-good-doctor-a-sons-look-at-an-earlier-generation.html?ref=health&_r=1

“A heartwarming story about a father-son doctor duo spanning a century, exquisitely showing the evolution of medical practice from antibiotics through bioethics. A small gem of a book.”

—Samuel Shem, MD, author of *The House of God* and *The Spirit of the Place*

“*The Good Doctor* is a lovely book and a loving book; it’s a book about medicine and family and ethics and history that embraces complexity and speaks to all those subjects with wide-ranging compassion and great good sense. And it’s a father-son doctor saga with much to say about the healing power of story and understanding.”

—Perri Klass, MD, author of *A Not Entirely Benign Procedure* and *The Mercy Rule*

“The younger Lerner is occasionally shocked by his father’s belief that his intimate knowledge of his patients and their diseases gave him insight and authority on what was best for them, including the proper time to stop treatment and allow a patient to die. Yet Lerner does more than criticize; he thoughtfully examines the case for both ways of practicing medicine, and in many ways the book is a tribute as much as a critique. Perhaps, Lerner argues, there is an appropriate middle ground behind the father’s art of care and the son’s.”

—*Health Affairs*

Questions for Discussion

1. The first two pages of the book tell a dramatic story of a doctor using his own body to *prevent* other doctors from resuscitating a dying patient. What would you have thought if you were a doctor in that room? If you were a family member? If you were the patient?
2. Each doctor practiced medicine in very different time periods. What changes in medicine do you think caused the biggest differences between father and son? What do you think is the strongest similarity between the two?
3. In his third and fourth year as a medical student, the second Dr. Lerner witnessed several physician-patient interactions that raise ethical and philosophical questions about the practice of medicine. Which specific encounters made him most uncomfortable? How did these instances pique his interest in the ethics of patient care?
4. While the first Dr. Lerner was inspired to choose a career as a physician from a “sense of survivor’s guilt and appreciation for his good luck,” the second Dr. Lerner says that his

choice to become a doctor was primarily “as a way to do good for others.” What do you think this says about the generation gap between the author and his father? What do you think is the primary motivation for doctors today?

5. The author says that his father’s “devotion to the scientific basis of medicine left him with little interest in religion or the supernatural.” How did Meyer’s death and his wife’s illness challenge this thinking? In which viewpoint do you think he found the most closure?
6. The debate of the ethics of patient autonomy vs. physician authority creates a huge divide between the older and younger generations of physicians. How would you like to see these two philosophies balanced in your own medical care? Have you had any positive or negative experiences of either philosophy?
7. The first Dr. Lerner has some memorable patients: Laura, Susan, and Jonathan. How did reading stories about them in his father’s journals affect the author as a physician? What about as a historian and bioethicist?
8. Writing in his journal was an important and primary outlet for the first Dr. Lerner to release his frustrations, thoughts, and memorable experiences. What does the second Dr. Lerner learn about his father through his journals that he wouldn’t know otherwise?
9. What fears did the elder Dr. Lerner have for the future generations of doctors? Do you think his criticisms of the younger generations of physicians were reasonable? Why or why not?
10. One criticism of new medical trends is that doctors and medical care have become too reliant on technology. What are some examples of this from the book? Do you think that doctors’ reliance on technology is good or bad for their patients? Why?
11. When his father is admitted to Menorah Park, “a top-notch local nursing home,” the author is distressed to see his father among “the other severely ill residents” and compares this to the time when he “was the supremely confident and able medical director, rushing around

the building, caring for and reassuring such patients.” Have you had similar experiences caring for older relatives?

12. When Dr. Phil Lerner says that he would be willing to go to the hospital as his sickness worsens and even go on a ventilator, the younger Dr. Lerner says, “I had hoped his beliefs would remain consistent.” How does the elder Dr. Lerner’s acceptance of a procedure that he opposed his entire career challenge his son’s views of medical care? Do you think that this drastic change in priorities is expected or understandable? (*See Additional Resources for “Overruling my Father” Op-Ed*)
13. At his younger age, the second Dr. Lerner criticizes his father’s role as the primary physician for many family members because it blurs proper boundaries between doctors and patients. Later on in the book, he finds himself doing the exact same thing. How does this support or undermine his clear-cut notions about physician-patient relationships?
14. Imagine the author did not come across his father’s journals. How would this have changed his understanding of his father’s career, relationships, and personal life? Do you think there were any negative consequences of reading his father’s journals?
15. In the prologue, the author asks, “Did physicians of my father’s era actually know their patients in a different – and better – way than physicians do today?” By the end of the book, do you think he was able to answer this question for himself? How would you respond to this question after reading *The Good Doctor*?

Additional Resources

→ **The New York Times *Op-Ed***

“When Medicine is Futile” by Barron H. Lerner

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/19/opinion/when-medicine-is-futile.html?ref=opinion&gwh=46187FF1609A76B56791A7FF404CBB2A&gwt=pay&assetType=opinion>

→ **The Wall Street Journal *Essay***

“When the Doctor Knows Best: Shared decision making is today’s medical standard, but it isn’t always best for patients” by Barron H. Lerner

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/when-the-doctor-knows-best-1404416121>

→ **The New York Times *Opinionator***

“Overruling My Father” by Barron H. Lerner

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/overruling-my-father/?mwrsm=Email&r=0>

→ **NPR *Fresh Air***

Interview: Barron Lerner, Author of *The Good Doctor*

<http://www.npr.org/2014/05/13/312169818/good-doctor-puts-past-medical-practices-under-an-ethical-microscope>

→ **Slate *Medical Examiner***

“Should Doctors Take Care of Their Relatives? My father would never ‘do things like this to a loved one!’” by Barron H. Lerner

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2014/05/ethics_of_doctors_caring_for_family_members_memoir_of_palliative_euthanasia.2.html

→ **The Atlantic *Health***

Interview with Barron Lerner: “The Doctor Used to Know Best” by James Hamblin

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/05/the-doctor-used-to-know-best/371170/>

→ **NYU School of Medicine: Literature, Arts & Medicine Blog**

“Two Doctors, Two Generations: Q&A with Dr. Barron Lerner”

<http://medhum.med.nyu.edu/blog/?p=3863>

→ **MedPageToday *Kevin MD***

“Ethical physicians, now and then” by Barron H. Lerner

<http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2014/06/ethical-physicians-now.html>