

Short White Coat: Lessons from Patients on Becoming a Doctor

James A. Feinstein, MD

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Reviewed by Olivera Baumgartner-Jackson for Reader Views (11/09)

“Short White Coat” by James A. Feinstein, MD, is a collection of wonderfully heart-warming stories about real life experiences of a third year medical student and the time he spent in the trial-by-fire environment dealing with real patients in different clinic and hospital settings. Ranging from frankly scary to truly uplifting, each of the stories teaches a lesson about listening, learning and growing. Written in a fluid, easy-to-read style, those stories are approachable and easy to relate to.

James Feinstein’s clinical year took him from internal medicine through ob-gyn, pediatrics, psychiatry and surgery to emergency medicine. In each of the new settings he encountered new challenges and worked alongside a variety of very different personalities, and all of those experiences must have been very helpful in shaping his own view of the profession he eventually joined as a practicing pediatrician. Occasionally funny, oftentimes sad, always very personal and displaying touching honesty and vulnerability, those stories are eye-opening for a variety of reasons. Dr. Feinstein does not white-wash the reality of the medical profession or the training for it. He speaks frankly about the grueling pace the overworked hospital staff has to keep up with, the frequently infuriating limitations of the system, the different lessons the patients themselves taught him about how to handle them with the proper respect and allow them to keep their dignity, the dangers of assumptions and quick conclusions, but also about the joy of seeing somebody get well and observing a good doctor making a real difference in somebody’s life. Dr. Feinstein describes doctors with hearts, those who know the healing power of touch and a warm word, as well as a few of those we all encounter all too often and wish we would have not; that is the superstars who are great technically, yet lousy human beings, and those who have no respect for patients and whose words cause more hurt than their actions would cure.

“Short White Coat” by James A. Feinstein, MD, should be required reading for everybody thinking of medical school as well as everybody working in the medical field. In addition to those, I believe that anybody close to those people as well as any patient would greatly profit from reading this wonderful collection of stories. Since that covers most anybody, particularly in the so-called “developed” world, let me simply say that I do believe reading “Short White Coat” would be a good idea for anybody who wants to understand more about doctors and doctoring. Judging by this book, Dr. Feinstein understands what makes a good doctor, and I sincerely hope more of his colleagues take his lessons to heart as well.