10 physician memoirs that offer inspiring accounts of life in medicine

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Sara Berg, MS
Senior News Writer

It seems like memoirs by famous people are on bookshelves across the country—from former presidents to musicians and reality TV stars. But there’s something more eye-opening about reading memoirs written by physicians from different specialties to get a better understanding of medicine and the challenges faced by medical students, residents and attending doctors.

Whether doctors or medical students are in search of books to read for relaxation or to learn more about a particular medical topic, the AMA “Shadow Me” Specialty Series—which offers advice directly from physicians about life in their specialties—provides some outstanding memoir recommendations to get a broader glimpse into life in medicine.

Here, in alphabetical order by book author, are 10 memoirs that AMA members who have participated in the “Shadow Me” Specialty Series recommend reading.

*In Shock: My Journey from Death to Recovery and the Redemptive Power of Hope*

By Rana Awdish, MD

“It’s the story of an intensivist who had a catastrophic medical event during pregnancy and survived countless complications,” said Devang Sanghavi, MD, a critical care medicine specialist. “It showcases the tremendous power of hope and is a must-read for all medical students.”

*Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*

By Norman Cousins
The book offers “an outstanding reminder that we are all humans and medicine is an art and a privilege to provide. We are part of a patient’s health team,” said Diana Ramos, MD, an ob-gyn.

**Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness**

By Susannah Cahalan

For transfusion medicine, Scott Koepsell, MD, a pathologist, recommends this book because the author “tells her story about developing a neurological disease that was treated with an apheresis blood procedure.”

**Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness**

By Kay Jamison, PhD

This book is about “a psychologist who suffers from bipolar disorder,” said Lisa MacLean, MD, a psychiatrist. “It’s an easy read, but also a testament of how successful a person can be with stable treatment.”

**When Breath Becomes Air**

By Paul Kalanithi, MD

“It is a posthumously published memoir of a remarkable physician who died of advanced lung cancer at a young age,” said Omar T. Atiq, MD, a medical oncologist. “It encapsulates life, its triumph and fragility, and makes one ponder about life’s priorities.”

Anesthesiologist Gerald R. Callas, MD, also recommended Dr. Kalanithi’s memoir, saying that it “really puts life in perspective as a medical student and physician.”

“This book helped me appreciate the joy of practicing medicine, as well as the unpredictability and fragility of the gift of life,” said Walter Park, MD, a gastroenterologist.

**What Matters in Medicine: Lessons from a life in Primary Care**

By David Loxtercamp, MD

“Dr. Loxtercamp is a family medicine physician and a gifted author who writes about a variety of topics in primary care medicine, often using anecdotes from his practice in coastal Belfast, Maine,” said Christopher Garofalo, MD, a family physician. “It is a great read about the history of primary care.”
Black Man in a White Coat: A Doctor's Reflections on Race and Medicine
By Damon Tweedy, MD

Sheila Rege, MD, a radiation oncology, said this is one of several books that “helped me understand the doctor-patient relationship, how and why it’s sacred, and how important the trust and bond between us is.”

My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS
By Abraham Verghese, MD

Dr. Park recommends reading this book because “it emphasizes the importance of being compassionate with patients.”

When the Air Hits Your Brain
By Frank Vertosick, MD

“Exploring some of the memoirs written by those who have walked the path before can be inspiring,” said Nitin Agarwal, MD, a neurosurgeon.

Exhale: Hope, Healing and a Life in Transplant
By David Weill, MD

Transplant hepatologist Nigel Girgrah, MD, PhD, noted that the author of this book, Dr. Weill, “is a lung transplant doctor and a friend and colleague of mine.”

“The great thing about this book is it talks about the trials and tribulations of being a transplant doctor, including burnout,” said Dr. Girgrah.

For nonfiction recommendations, here are eight great books hand-picked by doctors for your reading list. And for medical students and physicians who are more interested in reading fiction, here are five fantastic novels doctors recommend.

The AMA Specialty Guide simplifies medical students’ specialty selection process, highlights major specialties, details training information, and provides access to related association information. It is produced by FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database®.

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