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On the Books: Reading Overtreated

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Overtreated: Why Too Much Medicine is Making us Sicker and Poorer by Shannon Brownlee
Jeff Eliason

Medical school does not afford one an excessive amount of free time to read books for actual enjoyment. That limited free time is usually more judiciously spent allowing your brain to recover from Miniboards, Robbins, or anatomy lab. On the off-chance some reading takes place, it is usually in the form of Star magazine or our beloved Goose. Nevertheless, I feel it is my duty as your colleague to encourage you to check out *Overtreated* by Shannon Brownlee.

First of all, try not to think of it as a book. Think of it more like a year's worth of Star magazines in one binding; except take away the pictures, and in their place add full, articulate sentences that make sense and are relevant to our chosen career path as physicians. Once you start doing that, you will realize the book is actually a very quick read; a brief, yet comprehensive summary of the current state of health care in U.S. that is both surprising and infuriating. Many of the facts Brownlee brings to the table we know: we spent \$2.1 trillion on health care in 2006, yet 47 million Americans remain uninsured. In life expectancy we are a few months better than Costa Rica, but are years behind Canada and most of Western Europe.

As the author notes, there are a number of reasons for the exorbitant costs of health care: wasteful bureaucratic overhead, malpractice, moral hazard (the idea that being insured makes one use more health care than he/she really needs), and high costs. However, the main focus of this book is on the one fifth to one third of all costs (\$500 to \$700 billion) that does nothing to improve our health. Brownlee does an excellent job of detailing what and who is to blame for our current health care woes. She is not sympathetic to doctors (my main criticism of the book is she downplays the impact of malpractice and the fear it creates), however she is also quick to point out that insurance companies, drug companies, "managed care", and even patients shoulder a great deal of the fault for the excess of unnecessary care. Her solutions to the problem are intriguing, although perhaps a little idealistic. Anyone with an interest in medicine should read this book, because if there is to be change in our health care system, it will have to be initiated by social and economic forces, for I think it has become painfully clear the political establishment has no motivation and/or power to change.