

## Medicine's heretic bible nearly 30 years onward

Kit Boyes reviews *The House of God* by Samuel Shem  
Auckland School of Medicine

Thirty years ago. Thirty years ago our half gallon quarter acre pavlova paradise had twice as many sheep, half the elderly and the third highest standard of living in the world. There were 14 people on the dole. That's right, 14. Women in the civil service could be sacked for marrying. Petrol was cheap. Hippies were flocking to Bert Potter's commune. The Springboks had just toured unmolested. The Treaty was "a praiseworthy device for the amusement of ignorant Savages" and Howick was as white as the skin beneath a civil servant's walk shorts. We had troops in Vietnam and Tim Shadbolt got himself arrested for saying "bullshit".

Thirty years ago. Auckland's new School of Medicine sent its first crop of doctors nervously out into hospitals, hospitals that were run by elected DHBs. As they always had been. Thirty years ago the Arab League got Yom Kippured, the economy OPECed and no one wondered why only men went to the moon. Richard Nixon was dragged out of the Whitehouse lying and smirking and a Harvard MD-cum-Rhodes scholar named Stephen Bergman was winding up the internship he recalled with horror in *The House of God*.

Every profession has its joke laws; soldiers know that tracer works both ways. Lawyers never ask a question unless they know the answer. And in medicine, gomers (get-out-of-my-emergency-room) go to ground. Yet no other profession has exposed its unwritten rules into an unholy bible like our iconic *The House of God*.

I did do my research before entering medicine. I spoke to six doctors. The first told me I was nuts, and to buy a book called *The House of God*. The second said exactly the same, and it's been translated into 20 languages. Docs 3 through 5 checked that I'd read it. And the sixth, well I started this review with the sixth.

But were they right? Is *The House of God* still relevant? Thirty years is a long time in the health sector. Hey, restructuring has only been going for twenty. *The House of God* was not written for posterity. It was written for the here and now, or rather, the there and then. Has *The House of God* passed the test of time? Is there still really

a need for med students to torture themselves with all its anger and despair and fart jokes?

Let's have a look.

### That 70s show

*The House of God* assumes you'll know quite a bit about 70s medicine, but most of this makes sense, because anatomy doesn't change and there's only so many ways you can treat a pneumothorax'.

It's also assumed you'll know quite a bit about 70s USA. This is a bit more of a headache. If you're a med student born in the 80s wondering who this Nixon schmaltz is, quite a bit is going over your head.

The narration is dated by a running account of the collapsing Nixon administration. Literally. Nowhere in the book does it say 1973 or 1974, but you can track most events by the recurring cross-references to Watergate. The author kicks the crooked Richard Nixon round to mirror medical management's desire to accumulate power and delegate blame. Details of Tricky Dicky's decline and plummet will be unfamiliar to many 21st century kiwis.

Consider a couple of obscure references – Mo Dean's dresses and 'Wrong Way' Corrigan's hair do.

*The newly wed stunning Mrs Maureen Dean sat in the public gallery, dressing for photographers four days in a row watching as her hot-shot husband, Whitehouse junior counsel John Dean, caught by his conscience, confessed to crimes that jailed him, broke her and implicated the President.*

*Real life Mister Magoo 'Wrong Way' Corrigan took his little plane up for a little hop, and got a lot lost. He aimed for Long Island and landed in Ireland.*

What Corrigan's hair looked like, I've no idea. Mo Dean's dresses I've seen only in black and white. No doubt these were common knowledge in 70s Boston. I was alive at

the time, if not potty trained, but don't know how many other references I've missed.

Many med students will miss these asides. But they are asides, and easily ignored. Someday, maybe some anorak can halve the book's readership by annotating the obscurities. We read Robinson Crusoe without footnotes and thirty years is a lot less than three hundred.

### Karma police, arrest that book

*The House of God* has been criticised for negative depiction of women and African-Americans. Its language doesn't pass the PC of PC – John Updike, who wrote an apologetic introduction.

Liberals tend to judge literature by how PC it is, rather than how good it is. *The House of God* is not great literature – intro by John Updike or not – but if we're judging its medical utility, its political soundness is no more relevant than whether Hippocrates was a sexist or a slave owner. But then I'm a male and mostly white, so I would say that, wouldn't I? We'd better have a look at the problem.

Sexism? The women in this book are characterised by their breast shape. Some receive a lot of characterisation. Many of the women are smart, powerful, and moral. Berry is about the only indisputably "good" person in the book. Our narrator's first words are to praise her. Well, okay, her Cooper's ligaments.

Race relations? Chuck is da funny-talkin' black intern. Chuck no sittin' dem exams he fillin' in these affirmative discriminashun post-cards ... Then again Chuck's competent, caring, and his clinical skills are about the best of the interns. What's the author's message? Well there is no message. Not about race or sex anyway.

However, it does stand out that doctors come in all races, creeds and genders, and no one in the book sees that as unusual. It's not unusual in 2003 New Zealand, but how usual was it in 70s Boston? Maybe there's a message after all. However, to look for a message is to miss the point.

The first-person narrative style gets you to identify with the narrator, and then only gradually reveals that the narrator is as deeply flawed as any other character. Not an original device – think of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* – but it's effective, once you've identified with the character, you may recognise the faults you see in him in you too.

The tale begins by quoting the conquistador Bernal Diaz:  
*We came here to serve God.*  
*And also to get rich.*

The narrative is not politically correct because the narrator is not PC. None of the characters are. They are not supposed to be. The doctors smoke, take drugs, have unprotected adulterous sex, and drink and drive. It's almost *Shortland Street*.

*The House of God* is about forcing you to see yourself when you don't want to recognise the jerk in the mirror. That is one service it provides med students, and one reason why it is recommended to us. The other is it tells us what to expect apart from the fairy tale.

### Through the Looking Glass

In medicine there is a self-imposed censorship. The protestant work ethic Thought Police. Medicine is Good. Doctors are Good. Medicine and Doctors cure patients. Patients are grateful. Long after the lie wears thin, long after Michael Botteril and Herbert Green, after CHEs and RHAs and after Thalidomide and leeches, the illusion is still something we want.

That is what the infamous counter-intuitive rules of *The House of God* are all about – the knowledge that doctors need but don't dare speak about. *The House of God* is recommended because it is supposed to let you see medicine as it really is.

Or does it show medicine as it was? Do the rules of *The House of God* apply in the 21st century? Let's look at a few.

**Placement comes first.** Speaking from experience, I broke a leg and had to use nepotism, bribery *and* corruption to escape orthopaedic inter-hospital pass the parcel.

**Gomers don't die.** Life expectancy has increased, birth rates fallen and there is no cure for dementia. Geez, there are more retirement villages in Auckland than cell phone towers. In every lifetime lease, there is a little clause reserving the right to dump residents requiring residential care. The Gomer is alive and well and coming soon to an emergency room near you.

**Gomers go to ground.** Well, yes and that's what hip protectors are for.

**The patient is the one with the disease.** As far as I can work out, under WHO guidelines, we are all diseased. This could explain increasing health expenditure.

**The delivery of medical care is to do as much nothing as possible.** The idea appeals to Pharmac, but for most New Zealanders it is tainted by Herbert Green and the Unfortunate Experiment. Thanks to ACC New Zealand has never been quite as prone to defensive medicine as America. Though so far in Medical School I have never, ever, heard anyone use the phrase 'first do no harm'.

*Well, that's a mighty long book review and you still haven't told us if we need the book.*

*Dunno, ask me after I've been a house officer.* ■

Kit is a medical student who has a BA, LLB, a Clifford the Big Red Dog certificate in cycling proficiency and an unhealthy obsession with cricket. He has worked variously as a pizza delivery boy, soldier and McGillicuddy Serious shadow minister for legalised theft (taxation). He also practised law, but has since repented. Kit wrote this article as displacement activity between exams and bomb scares.



*Those of us lucky enough to live in Dunedin have discovered it already, but visitors to New Zealand's most congenial city have the pleasure of discovering it for the first time all by themselves. No, we're not talking about the Albatross Colony or the Captain Cook (although both are worth a visit).*

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