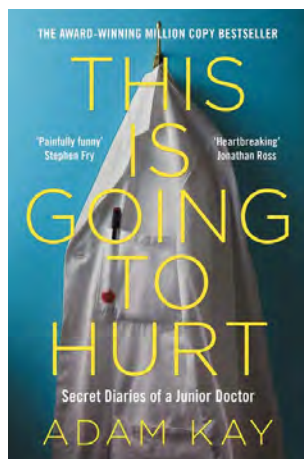


» This is going to hurt: secret diaries of a junior doctor by Adam Kay

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“Hilarious.” “Riveting.” “Painfully funny.” These are not typical descriptions one would associate with books of the medical non-fiction genre. Then again, this book is not like other medical memoirs.

In 263 short pages, Adam Kay provides his perspective on the medical profession through his five-year journey as a junior doctor working in Britain’s National Health Service from 2005–2010. Through a diary-entry writing style, he reflects on his most memorable

moments on the job – both the highlights and the lowlights. In doing so, Kay achieves the difficult balance of delivering an important and powerful message in a thoroughly entertaining manner.

Kay has been a professional comedian and writer since 2010. We need to understand his motivations for writing this book in order to appreciate its message. For this, we need to rewind to 2016 when there were a series of strikes as part of industrial action by the British Medical Association – the union for junior doctors in the United Kingdom. This was the first strike action by British doctors in over 40 years following disagreements in contract negotiations with the government regarding pay and safe working hours.

Contract negotiations had in fact started from 2013 but had been affected by “media manipulation and attempts to sway public opinion”.² From the author’s perspective, “junior doctors... [were] struggling to get their side of the story across”.¹ Having worked on the front line himself, Kay felt he “had to do something to redress the balance.”¹

The reader is taken on a vicarious journey of Kay’s progression up the professional ladder through nine chapters over five years – ending as a senior obstetrics & gynaecology registrar. We begin alongside him in his very first post as a house officer. Through a series of selected stories of his days in the hospital – whether it be the workload, a troublesome patient, a difficult decision or being perpetually exhausted; the lifestyle of a junior doctor becomes more and more apparent.

We also gain an insight into the personal toll of the job – one Kay describes as often being dominated by challenges and difficult situations but also having significant highlights that make the job seem worthwhile. However, as the author warns right from the onset, there is no happy ending; his account culminates in an event which proves to be the end of his medical career.

Overall, these diaries of a junior doctor are a blend of two contrasting themes; a dichotomy of heartbreak and hilarity. As one reviewer puts it, “hilarious as they are horrifying”.¹ This is a unique example of writing when considering the genre and the author’s overarching message. Never does the reader feel weighed down by the stories and this is due to the writer’s ability to bring forward the humour in his situation without belittling the humbling, sometimes painful, reality of the job. Although the book is largely aimed at those who may be unaware of the truth of what it means to be a junior doctor, doctors and other health professionals alike will also revel in Kay’s story-telling craft.

The book concludes with an open letter from Kay to the Secretary of State for Health: “you and your successor and their successors... should have to work some shifts alongside junior doctors...to know what the job really entails. If you knew, you’d be eternally grateful for everything they do. The way you treat junior doctors demonstrably doesn’t work”.¹ Unlike the carefully constructed nine chapters where he has subtly portrayed his thoughts, here Kay is blunt and direct. The message is crystal clear.

This collection of tales is particularly relevant in New Zealand given the ongoing contract dispute between the Resident Doctor’s Association and District Health Boards regarding safer working hours. From the opposite side of the world, this is a timely reminder of the invaluable work done by junior doctors. Kay’s goal is to represent an honest and moving perspective from someone who has been in the trenches themselves. If the numerous positive reviews are anything to go by, this award-winning Sunday Times bestseller has achieved exactly that.

References

1. Kay A. This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor. London: Picador; 2017.
2. Goddard A. Lessons to Be Learned From the UK Junior Doctors' Strike. JAMA. 2016;316(14):1445.

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