

Do No Harm and Admissions by Henry Marsh

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Cam is a final year medical student at Waikato Hospital. Outside of medicine he can be found reading a book but he's probably watching Netflix.

by Eben Alexander. And the artists who accidentally became surgeons, see *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. Thankfully, Henry Marsh's books falls squarely in the latter category.

Conflict of Interest: None

You know Henry Marsh. He grilled you on an eponymous sign during a radiology meeting. His self-importance and time spent in hospital led to his divorce. His car gets towed because he is rushing to theatre and takes a reserved spot. Do No Harm and his follow up book Admissions breaks down that arrogant doctor we think we know and hope we don't resemble.

A surgeon once recommended "Do No Harm" to me but then tempered his praise by saying that "the author must be seriously depressed". Henry Marsh is shocking not because he is mentally ill, but because he breaks with medical culture and honestly admits to having emotions and flaws. In his writing, you feel his shame as he detours around the bed of a patient that he "wrecked" in surgery. His conflict over saving the life of a patient with an expected neurologic outcome that will be worse than death. His extreme anxiety as he teaches his trainee to clip an aneurysm. At times his honesty is awkward, his squabbles with bureaucrats and speech and language therapists make him sound petulant. Yet despite his flaws, Henry Marsh has a fundamental love of people, this is most obvious when he describes his attempts to bring modern neurosurgery to the Ukraine and Nepal.

Marsh's love of the brain and surgery bring much needed lightness to some of the bleaker case histories that are common on neurosurgical wards. His prose is often more poetic than academic.

"My sucker is moving through thought itself, through emotion and reason, that memories, dreams and reflections should consist of jelly, is simply too strange understand. Do No Harm."

"Much of what we think of as real is a form of illusion, a consoling fairy story created by our brains to make sense of the myriad stimuli from inside and outside us, and of the unconscious mechanics and impulses of our brains. Admissions."

In both books, Henry romanticises the "good old days of medicine. When the doctor was a hospital's supreme authority, house officers never left the hospital, and doctors treated other doctor's family members for free. He worries that medicine is becoming a job rather than a vocation and that work hour restrictions make us worse doctors. This is not a serious policy prescription but rather a surgeon on the edge of retirement pining for a more honourable time. A time when after operating on a local GP's wife who died soon after surgery he still received the traditional payment of wine.

Neurosurgeons that write books for a general audience often fall into one of three categories. The future politician who carefully crafts his heroic public image, see *Gifted Hands* by Ben Carson. The pious who interpret their experiences through a religious lens, see *Proof of Heaven*