



# The Good Doctor by Dr Lance O'Sullivan

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> Michaela Rektorysova is a third-year medical student. For her clinical years she hopes to be based outside of Auckland. In her free time, Michaela is an Army combat medic and enjoys hiking with heavy weights, sleeping in the bush and reading the occasional book.

I first heard of Dr O'Sullivan a few years ago as the man who challenged the anti-vaxxer movie screening. When I recently stumbled upon his book and read the prologue, I was hooked:

*'One of the teachers in a secondary school staffroom is struck by a memory of a former pupil.*

*"Whatever happened to that O'Sullivan boy?" she asks. "I supposed he's in jail by now."*

*A friend of the O'Sullivans overhears the conversation and can't resist. "You mean Lance?" she replies. "Lance is at medical school." Cue stunned silence.'*

That was not the opening one would expect from the biography of a doctor who had been named New Zealander of the Year. Lance was a troubled child who didn't know who he was. 'Too white to be Māori, too brown to be white'<sup>1</sup>. Due to his identity crisis, he struggled throughout his childhood until he was accepted into Hato Petera College, an Auckland high school with strong Māori character. Here, he embraced his Māori heritage and began to thrive. Lance's story proves that it is not the potential of a child that determines success but their desire to achieve this potential. For Lance, this was fuelled by feeling like he found his identity, like he belonged and, as he says, this was the difference between him becoming a doctor and ending up in prison.

When he reached his last year of high school he was told that he could do 'something more' and that he could be a doctor. As with most children who are born into families of a low socioeconomic status, who are raised with the aid of the benefit and who do not 'fit in' to the traditional Western schooling system, this was not an option he had ever considered. Until one day when he met a Māori doctor at the marae. This was a significant turning point in his life. He was so inspired by this meeting; from that point he had decided he was going to be a doctor. It wasn't an easy path, but he was eventually accepted into medical school, became a doctor, and moved to Kaitia.

Soon, Lance became dissatisfied with the way the clinic he worked at treated their patients. If they had outstanding fees or missed appointments, he was not allowed to see them. The paradox was that these patients were often the ones who needed to be seen the most. They would instead wait until the situation worsened so that they could go to the emergency department for free.

With his wife Tracey, Lance eventually established a medical clinic: Te Kohanga Whakaora. In the new clinic, patients were seen even if they had outstanding fees or could not pay for the appointment, and some days the clinic did not require appointments – the patients could simply walk in when they had the time or money. As Lance says, 'These people don't have \$5 for a visit or a prescription. They live day to day. And no, they aren't all angels. Some of them don't have money for prescriptions because they bought a box of beer. But if you've bought a box of beer, does that mean you don't deserve help? Does that mean their children don't either?'

Lance is determined to give Northland Māori children a better start in life and show them that they also can rise above the disadvantage that disease and poverty creates for them. But the main theme of the book is clear: Māori children from poor families can escape their disadvantages, but they shouldn't have to in the first place.

The book is written in simple language and therefore reads very easily. In contrast to many other books describing health issues, *The Good Doctor* describes the issues most prevalent in New Zealand and therefore hits close to home. For this reason, it is a must-read for all Kiwi health professionals. After all, the health of our people is everyone's issue.

## References

1. O'Sullivan, L, 2015. *The Good Doctor*. Penguin UK.

## Conflict of Interest

Michaela is a student reviewer for the NZMSJ. This article has gone through a double-blinded peer review process applied to all articles submitted to the NZMSJ, and has achieved the standard required for publishing. The author has no other conflict of interest.

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