

## R E V I E W S

*From a doctor's diary: the authentic physician's voice*

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**Kabra SG. *From a doctor's diary*. New Delhi: National Book Trust; 2013. Paperback, pp 101 ISBN 978-81-237-6928-8 INR 70**

*From a doctor's diary* by Shri Gopal Kabra is a small volume about the size of the *Indian Journal of Leprosy*, and like the journal, arrived wrapped in a sheet of plain brown paper tied cross-wise with white string. It stared hopefully back at me from my table for a few days until my curiosity got the better of me, and I cut the string to look inside. The front cover is designed tastefully, giving the appearance of parchment splotted with dried blood-stains, with drawings of a vertebral column, a brain in sagittal section, a stethoscope, and fading, cursive text in the background. The back cover details a frightening list of the author's qualifications and interests, ranging from medicine and law, anatomy, surgery and medical audit to medical journalism, and authorship of collections of short stories in Hindi. Not quite certain of what lay ahead, I started reading with some trepidation.

The book is a collection of short stories written in the style of a narrative in the physician's voice. Law and medical ethics are the common threads that run through the stories, which the author states are true, and they certainly seem to be. Occasionally the writing is stodgy, and sometimes verbose and devoid of humour. The recital of events suggests a writer who is reluctant to indulge in artistic licence; however, this leads the reader to believe the authenticity of the events described. The individual stories have been put in a suitable sequence and they sustain one's interest.

The stories cover diverse areas: honest errors turning into horrors and providential escape following medical errors; a whodunit; medico-legal ignorance and ethical problems; points of law and propriety; false-positive laboratory screening tests and their damaging consequences; the law and abetment of crime; devotion and dedication to duty; professional negligence; fortitude and dignity among the terminally ill; treatment aimed at comfort rather than cure; illness and the intellectual; euthanasia; the grotesque side of medicine; and overwhelming human kindness.

Often, ethical dilemmas do not have clear yes/no answers. Much depends on the point of view offered in the narration. Switching protagonists and viewing the same events from another perspective may open up new vistas of understanding. As I read on, I found myself waiting eagerly for the author's

observations and interpretations of the medico-legal and ethical dilemmas described. Here are some that caught the eye.

*"...in an acute life-threatening condition, it is not always easy for a doctor, and especially a surgeon, to decide on what is the appropriate course of action. Not infrequently, he has to walk on a knife's edge."*

*"...mistakes do save lives."*

*"It was miraculous in the quiet sort of way that everyday miracles happen."*

*"It is weird how one's opinion depends on the way the case is presented."*

*"The milk of human kindness is more than just a figure of speech."*

*"Human endurance is unfathomable."*

*"Gloom descended on the family. Even though her two children had not been told anything, the sudden change in their parents' behaviour, the subdued voices in which they talked and their show of extra affection made them uneasy, as if something sinister was about to descend upon the household. They wanted to know what had gone wrong but didn't know how to ask." (So true!)*

*"...das Kabir jatan sun odhi, yun ki yun dhar deeni, chadariya jheeni re jheeni." (A nice touch, giving the story the appropriate cultural context. I wished there had been more of these.)*

Some of the stories touched a personal chord. One of them reminded me of my father's auditory hallucinations in the early days of his battle with dementia. A doctor himself, he knew that hearing voices in his head was not right, but he could do little to stop them and feared that he would lose his mind. Another provoked the pathologist in me. Was the diagnosis really rodent ulcer, as the author would have us believe, or well-differentiated squamous cell carcinoma? Not that it mattered to the story.

The print is easily readable and the page layout is pleasing, but the copy-editing could have been better. Occasionally, the usage of words and the construction of sentences are odd (eg, "one should know what is sciatic nerve"; "on the horns of ethical dilemma" and "...would fool the passers-by into believing he was standing..."). At places, the tenses are mixed up.

After the first few stories, which held my attention because they are well written, there is a sudden dip in the quality of several stories in succession. These are preachy and contain too many laboured explanations. Moreover, the plots are not properly developed and the manner in which the stories end leaves much to be desired. The stories which have HIV as their theme could probably have been combined, to better effect. Some stories are illustrative, but seem fragmented. Perhaps this is a deliberate attempt to provoke the reader into thinking. Nevertheless, I felt that the fragments had the potential to be developed into a gripping story. It is here that the book is in danger of losing the reader.

On the brighter side, the author expresses his appreciation of human qualities with great eloquence. The admiration he feels for Chhotu and Sister Nicolette is heart-felt, and has given rise to heart-warming stories that reaffirm our faith in humanity and human resilience. Readers of the *IJME* and those who are inclined towards the medical humanities will find much to appreciate in the book, besides the ridiculously low price. Having read and reviewed the book, I made a quick online search for Shri Gopal Kabra and stumbled upon "Adhikar", the Hindi version of one of the stories in this book. Unsurprisingly, the story is much more powerful in the vernacular than in the English translation. However, for those who cannot read Hindi, I would recommend that they read *From a doctor's diary*.

## More questions than answers

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**Kabra SG. *Abortion in India: myth and reality*. Rajasthan: Rawat Publications; 2013. Hardcover, pp 189 ISBN 978-81-316-0564-6 INR 595**

In this book, Dr SG Kabra aims at presenting the medical, legal and social dimensions of induced abortions. More specifically, he is concerned about the misuse, and even disregard, of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act by medical professionals as well as pharmaceutical companies. As a senior professor from Jaipur, with degrees both in medicine and law, he has written extensively on medical ethics and medical audit.

The author has made a thorough attempt to list the studies pertaining to the male-female ratios in Rajasthan and India, and has also given estimates of the number of MTPs conducted. The appendices provide the complete MTP Act and the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, as well as the amendments to it, for the interested reader.

Unfortunately, the book does not fulfil its promise of being a fund of knowledge for "women activists . . . , medical professionals and policy-makers." In addition, it does not live up to the claim on the inner cover that it is a must-read for "pro-abortion and pro-life groups." This arises from the strong feelings of the author which prevent a balanced discussion on abortion. The use of terms like "pro-abortion" rather than "pro-choice", "culling of the female" (see page 89), and "Abortion pills: Murder marketed" (see page 63) reflects the deep conviction of the author regarding the social and medical aspects of MTP. This is further underlined by the detailed description of the development of the foetus in layman's terms, which is probably unnecessary in such a technical tome.

The description of the various surgical and medical procedures used covers only the barbaric methods which were employed in the past, but which have largely been abandoned by medical professionals. The author would have done well to

explain that if these practices continue to be used, it is because the government has not yet managed to reach every woman through the provisions of the MTP Act. It would also have been worthwhile to mention that due to patriarchy and the deep-rooted disregard for women's reproductive rights, women are still forced into illegal MTP instead of opting for a medically safe procedure. The fear of stigmatisation and compulsion to fulfil the family's desire for a male child are some of the important social factors. While there are detailed discussions on the right to life of the unborn foetus versus the right of a woman over her own body, there is no mention of the fact that the rights both of children and women are secondary to the perceived rights of men and the family in Indian society.

The book also digresses into discussions of diverse topics, such as medical transgressions against patients in laparoscopy deaths, the role of the state in violations of human rights, including the Nuremberg trials, and the question of whether female foeticide is the actual cause of the change in the gender ratio in India. While these issues merit attention, discussing them in this book does not help to accomplish the objectives of the book.

Chapter 9, which deals with the ethics of assisted reproductive techniques and what constitutes medical professional misconduct, is useful for medicos but clouds the topic of abortion in India, which is a sufficiently "multidimensional issue".

I read this book with interest as it covers a wide variety of ethical issues involving the medical professional and the state with respect to the subject of abortion. However, the author leaves us with more questions than answers. Considering the author's long years of experience in this field, I would have been happier if he had provided us with a detailed analysis of the steps that can be taken to ensure an ethical and non-stigmatising way of helping women win their reproductive rights and fight gender discrimination.