

BOOK REVIEW

The Crisis in Contemporary Medicine and the Rise of the Reflective Physician

Authors: Ian McDonald (Fellow, Royal Australasian College of Physicians)

This book is a tribute to Ian McDonald's extraordinarily broad professional interests and to his established capacity for reflection, learning from history, lateral thinking, creative innovation and leadership. It reflects his background in sociology, anthropology and clinical epidemiology, his experience as consultant physician, cardiologist, researcher and teacher, his long-standing roles as Director of the Cardiac Investigation Unit and founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Clinical Practice at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne and his associations with the University of Melbourne.

McDonald's stated objective is to highlight the contribution of the prevailing major health care *paradigm* to the "crisis" he perceives in contemporary health care. Approximately 200 years ago, this paradigm, which is rooted in scientific evidence, replaced the previous key paradigm, which had been paramount since the time of Hippocrates. McDonald argues that a new order of "reflective physicians" would lead to resolution of this crisis. By incorporating techniques learned from continuous quality improvement, such physicians would catalyse the emergence of a new and more inclusive major health care paradigm, which would still retain the strengths of the existing one.

Several chapters discuss in depth the meaning of the term *paradigm*. McDonald uses it to include the attitudes, shared-beliefs, practices and objectives of a group of like-minded individuals. He details the two major competing intellectual paradigms arising from the time of the ancient Greeks, *reductionism* versus *holism*. He shows how the current scientific paradigm evolved through reductionism following the Renaissance and the subsequent Enlightenment. The next step was the development of *quantitative* medical sciences, including empirical studies, in the teaching hospitals in France after the French Revolution.

Holism, the basis for the former long-established and prevalent health care paradigm, with its associated interpretive explanations of phenomena, while absolutely acceptable to many non-medical disciplines, sometimes clashes with the reductionism of health care evidence. Another reason for conflict is that in contrast to reductionism, holistic evidence is usually expressed in *qualitative* terms through a process of reasoned hypotheses. McDonald emphasises Kuhn's opinion that the gradual evolution of knowledge appears to have been punctuated by short periods of rapid philosophical transformation called *paradigm shifts*, including the shift away from holism to reductionism, which permitted the health care and other sciences to flourish.

McDonald argues that the prevailing reductionism of our medical science paradigm is only appropriate for some, but not all, kinds of health care evidence. It is valid, for example, for establishing drug-efficacy, with randomised controlled trials as the "gold standard". It is not valid, however, for addressing other questions arising in health care, for example evaluating the subtle clinical interactions between doctors and patients, as such questions necessitate

interpretive and hence qualitative approaches. As a consequence, in spite of this prevailing reductionist paradigm, a new paradigm is required which includes these approaches as well.

Subsequent chapters elaborate on the perceived crisis, in terms of the various components of “Clinical Inefficiency” and of “Consultation Failure”. He then discusses the history and evolution of health care evaluation, clinical epidemiology, evidence-based medicine and quality improvement and is even brave enough to define and detail “ Postmodern Medicine”. His final chapter deals with the qualities required of reflective physicians and an account of a model for their potential catalytic role in paradigm shift.

Although the text in this well-written 258-page tome is clearly presented, it is not recommended for exclusive bedside reading, because of the depth of its contents. On the other hand, an overview of content is easy, as each chapter includes brief introductory summaries of previous text as well as concise conclusions. The text, including chapter sub-headings, is indexed. Other strengths include the author’s admirably broad knowledge and his detailed analytical approach, the inclusion of relevant history drawn from the last 2000 years and his engaging and almost conversational writing-style. The book’s final paragraph explains the otherwise possibly occult meaning of the Chinese letters on the front cover, which illustrates McDonald’s view of danger followed by opportunity!

How might this book have been even better? Getting to the source of the broad and interesting references is difficult at times, as some quotations do not appear to be referenced. In addition, references at the end of chapters do not always include all references referred to in that chapter’s text, although some can be found in other chapters’ references. Referencing at the end of the book, as well as or instead of at the end of chapters, would have made this task easier. There also seem to be several sentences in which one word is missing and some minor typographical errors, although the meaning is usually clear, in spite of this. Furthermore, there are relatively few references to publications within the last 10-15 years.

This book will appeal to many, including those who know and admire Ian McDonald, to reflective physicians of all ages and to those, including students, from various health care and other academic disciplines who are interested in the evolution of intellectual and medical thinking. It will also appeal to those who share McDonald’s concerns about the current status of health care and how this might be improved.

Review provided by Dr. Peter Greenberg

Peter Greenberg, MD PhD FRACP, is a consultant physician in general internal medicine with long-standing interests in the teaching of clinical medicine and evidence-based practice. He has appointments to the Departments of General Medicine and to the Melbourne EpiCentre at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. as Honorary Principal Fellow in the Schools of Medicine and Population Health at the University of Melbourne and Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University.