

Michigan COMMENTARY

Are Hospitals Accountable to the Public? A Review of *The Great White Lie*

by Peter Pratt, Ph.D.

The American Hospital Association (AHA) knew right off the bat that the hospital industry ignored Walt Bogdanich's *The Great White Lie: How America's Hospitals Betray Our Trust and Endanger Our Lives* at its own risk. Even before the book was published, the AHA sent a press release to hospital associations detailing Bogdanich's credentials (a Pulitzer-Prize winning writer for the *Wall Street Journal*) and his assaults on the industry. The press release readily admitted that the book was "a well-researched and compellingly written compilation of true stories that show hospitals at their very worst. Murdered patients, drug-pushing doctors, incompetent technicians, venal CEOs, self-dealing boards. . . they're all here, and it's not a pretty picture."

The AHA warns its members not to become defensive should attention to the book in the media bring questions from local reporters. The gravity with which the AHA treats the book and the absence of hysterical counterclaims in its press release are admirable and appropriate. *The Great White Lie* is an important book not because it may rile private payers or government into wholesale reform of our health care system (it won't), but because it gives insiders an outsider's impressively documented and wide-ranging view of the shortcomings of the system.

As might be expected, the book has its share of sensational, if still frightening anecdotes about patient dumping, hospitals bribing doctors, untrained lab technicians and temporary nurses, and murders in hospitals. In fact, it opens with the lengthy and well-publicized story of a physician murdered at New York City's Bellevue by a former resident of the hospital's psychiatric ward who, after being released, had walked the halls dressed in scrubs with a stethoscope, indistinguishable from the physicians. Elsewhere, a hospital CEO's office is compared—in a figure of speech that some will find nettlesome—to the office of a prosperous personal-injury lawyer. Cleveland's mafiosi make an appearance as associates of doctors who have run from state to state until they found asylum at a rural Ohio hospital that was willing to overlook their past incompetence, a kind of gang that couldn't suture straight.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss these "gatherings of felons" (a chapter title) as isolated anecdotes. The cumulative effect of the anecdotes is chilling. If you are skeptical of the book's initial sensationalism, by the end you are astounded by the variety of abuses Bogdanich exposes. Taken together, the stories illustrate how easy it is for one person—and one person is often enough—to make a mistake that endangers a patient's life.

Bogdanich's perspective is rarely heard in health policy circles, in legislative committee hearings and deliberations, where outsiders'—patients and consumers—perspectives often are deemed moving but isolated cases. What should concern health professional and lay readers of this book more is the author's ability to join the anecdote to a systemic problem in the delivery of health care. The harrowing stories of corruption and negligence rarely stand alone. Often, they pave the way for engrossing discussion of the failure of the federal government and private organizations (the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, the College of American Pathologists) to police hospitals and physicians adequately. He attacks these "oversight" groups as vigorously as he does hospitals.



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A ceaseless critic of too little regulation and hospitals' evasion of accountability, Bogdanich blames both outsiders and insiders. According to Bogdanich, health policy makers and hospital administrators vexed by the labyrinth of regulation hospitals must navigate should count their blessings: "A humane society recognizes that government. . . has a role to play in driving the dishonest, incompetent, or wasteful medical provider from business. Patients need the protection of better laws, better regulation and enforcement, truly independent investigators, and public disclosure of more than just the most flagrant abuses." After 271 pages that recounted flagrant abuses that went undetected, it is hard to take this conclusion lightly.

Bogdanich has a field day with the prospective payment system, enlivening its history for layperson and health professional alike with a detective story detailing the General Accounting Office's attempts to audit the hospital cost reports that would form the base for DRG rates. An equally engrossing chapter on hospitals' DRG coding abuses shows that Bogdanich is capable of making a good story out of the most erudite of health care topics. This storytelling skill should not be overlooked, for Bogdanich's ability to flesh out these topics makes them much more likely to catch the public's, media's, and perhaps even Congress's, eye.

Bogdanich also hammers home the standard arguments levelled against hospitals in the eighties, describing how hospitals sacrifice low-paid workers who care for patients (nurses, social workers) for high-priced experts in financial manipulation (MBAs and medical records consultants). Needless to say, he has very little sympathy for the hardships engendered for hospitals by Medicare and other payers' cost controls. On DRGs, in fact, he attacks hospitals both coming and going, condemning quicker-and-sicker discharges and inadequate discharge planning in an early chapter and condemning DRG coding abuses later on.

Bogdanich wants us to understand that the myth—that all hospitals and doctors are equally good and deserving of our complete, unquestioned trust—is a "great white lie." The AHA press release, perhaps unintentionally, also acknowledges that there are differences among hospitals: "Hospitals that put a high priority on quality measurement and monitoring and can point to areas where they shine are likely to be far ahead of the game in winning the public's confidence."

Whether hospital leaders agree or disagree with any or all of this book's contentions, they must recognize that the public trust in hospitals is teetering. Health policy makers have called for public accountability and disclosure for some time now. Bogdanich's book is not just another voice in the chorus; it is a ringing solo for more demanding and knowing consumers.

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