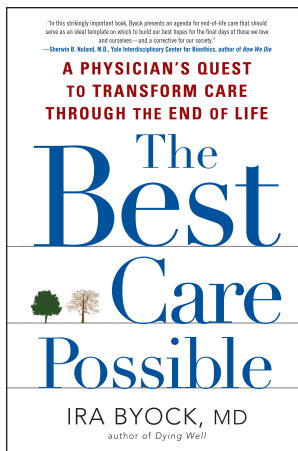


BOOK REVIEW



The Best Care Possible: A Physician's Quest to Transform Care through the End of Life

Ira Byock;
Avery Books, 2012;
ISBN 978-1-58333-459-1,
336pp, US\$26,
hardcover

Almost 20 years ago, Ira Byock came to work with me and the palliative care team to which I belonged in Bath, England, for a few weeks. What struck me then was what a personable and skilled communicator he was, and how easily he drew stories out of people we met in different clinical situations. Our friendship has grown over the years, and I have watched as this advocate for the voice and rights of dying patients and their families has influenced the delivery and understanding of end-of-life care — especially in the United States, but also worldwide.

I read with admiration his first book, *Dying Well*, and I was delighted to see that in his latest book he develops some of the themes that he articulated so well in the first. In *The Best Care Possible*, Byock continues to challenge the way in which priorities in health care are decided.

Scanning the table of contents, one feels that one might be in for an interesting time: chapter titles include “Between Scylla and Charybdis,” “What Are Doctors For?” and “The Busy Day that Sharon Died.” Byock doesn’t disappoint. Using real-life stories involving people of all ages, he outlines barriers to the provision of good, effective end-of-life care and suggests “practical and affordable strategies” as remedies. He outlines his own

“list of reasonable expectations that patients who are seriously ill deserve to have fulfilled” (p. 244), and he writes in simple terms about how he teaches patients to advocate for themselves more effectively by using pain scales and descriptors to help emphasize each symptom (p. 245). With skillful storytelling, he brings us with him as he meets and cares for people, each meeting deftly described in a few short paragraphs. Incorporating input from colleagues, he addresses what matters most to these people so that they may receive the best care possible.

This is a book written compassionately and wisely. It describes people’s stories with sensitivity, and it contains truths, some unpalatable, about what needs to be done. It also contains uncomfortable truths about some of the absurdities of modern health care. It is tempered with the sort of wisdom that can only come from years of experiencing the highs and the lows of this type of care.

With this book, Ira Byock issues a clarion call to those who want to reclaim life from the medical machine that seems to have overtaken so much of health care. He personalizes the stories of people, not for dramatic effect but to make them real. These are people whom we might meet on any day, but they are presented through images we will never forget. Who could forget Sharon, in a “well-worn black sweatshirt. Chipped black nail polish adorned all digits but her left pinky on which the oxygen saturation sensor was taped”? What is crystal clear throughout is how much Byock cares for these people. That, I suspect, is his gift to them. This, perhaps, is the final and most powerful message in his book. “Our most effective actions will be motivated by love of one another and performed with joy,” he writes. “The healthiest response to death is to love, honor and celebrate life.” This book does exactly that.

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