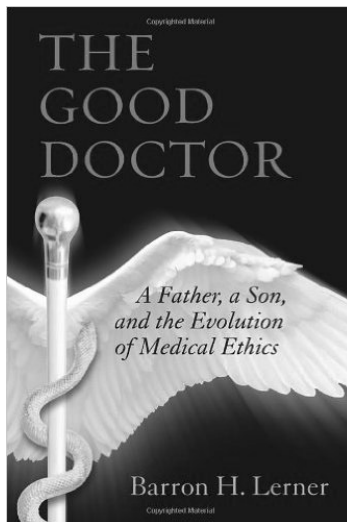


## Book review

### The Good Doctor: A Father, a Son, and the Evolution of Medical Ethics

Barron H. Lerner, Beacon Press, Boston 2014



This is a fascinating and well written account of Barron Lerner's discovery of his father as a man and a doctor and how Barron, who had specialised in medical ethics, had to reevaluate some of his own views on the doctor-patient relationship. The story is essentially that of Philip Lerner, the son of Jewish immigrants to the United States from Poland at the beginning of the 20th century.

When his own children were born, Philip started to write to each of them on their birthdays in secret journals, initially just thoughts on the day, which evolved into longer accounts of family life and Lerner senior's dealings with his patients. A major motivating force for Philip was to repay his parents for the sacrifices they had made in leaving Europe and thereby avoiding the Holocaust. He belonged to the 'old

school' of medical paternalism, when the doctor knew best and the patient had little input into their care: treatment options were not discussed and terminal diagnoses were not mentioned. Doctors worked all day, every day: patients had their home phone numbers and they were on call even when on holiday overseas. That work meant that the doctors had time to know their patients as individuals with lives and families of their own: but did that knowledge give the doctor the right to make decisions about patient care without consultation?

As Barron Lerner enters medical school himself, he develops an interest in medical ethics and sees doctors such as his father as dinosaurs, whose behaviour might have been justified at the time but who had no place in late 20th century healthcare. He then starts to read his father's journals and finds a series of challenging case histories: unilateral decisions about end-of-life care, research conducted on people without informed consent, acting as primary physician for one's own family. Reading these in context, Barron has to question his own values and some of the 'progress' of modern medical ethics. Well worth a read.

Joan Marsh  
Past president

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