Preface

This book is about what we have learned in several millennia of medical practice and about the art of doctoring – using that wisdom in daily patient care. It is about the elderly woman with pneumonia you treated yesterday afternoon and the middle aged man with chest pain you saw this morning. It is about the child with croup, struggling for the next breath in the middle of the night, and about the medicines we use each day. It is about your community members who look to you for leadership and the medical student you are mentoring. It is also about you and me, as humble members of the most noble profession, and our families who support us and who worry about our well-being.

To fully appreciate the nobility of our calling, we physicians – indeed, all health professionals – need to know about current applications of our heritage from past generations of medical practitioners and scholars. These include how to think like both a professional clinician and an empathic human being; how to manage disease, illness and death; and how to care for our patients, their families, and ourselves and our families – in short, how to be a knowledgeable, wise and caring twenty first century physician.

As you read the pages that follow, you will discern three themes – as suggested by the introductory quotations. The first involves the legacy of medical knowledge and wisdom provided to us by our predecessors, and for which we should give thanks each day. Knowledge and wisdom, of course, are not quite the same. There is medical knowledge, the rapidly expanding treasury of objective data that helps us deliver evidence-based medical care, and there is medical wisdom, which is subjective, philosophical, and sometimes surprisingly intuitive. The second theme is the imperative of our
service to others, the fundamental mission of medicine and doctoring. And the third is the physician’s ongoing quest for self-actualization – in the words of Paulo Coelho, the seeking of one’s personal legend, a journey that takes on special meaning for those would be healers.

In exploring the three themes, I have sought the time-honored advice of experienced healers and investigators – the wise physicians. A great deal of what follows might be considered “oral history,” thoughts and tales seldom recorded in standard textbooks. Nevertheless, to make this the most scholarly work possible, I have attempted to support precepts and maxims with concrete examples derived from three sources: the current medical literature, anecdotes from the history of medicine, and the personal narratives of practicing physicians, including some of my own stories.

The book’s title *Medical Wisdom and Doctoring: the Art of 21st Century Practice* was chosen to emphasize that the content is relevant to what physicians do today. You will read about some current diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, practical communication skills, pertinent ethical issues, and trends that just might foretell tomorrow’s practice. In addition, there are chapters on caring for you, the physician, as well as for your family and your community – endeavors I consider essential to achieving your full potential as a physician.

Some items you will read describe the exploits of “great doctors” who have preceded us. These include Moses Maimonides, Ambroise Paré, John Snow, Francis Weld Peabody, the brothers Mayo and others. In addition, many of the topics presented have come from unsung medical heroes, the hardworking clinicians who, in their daily practice of medicine, have also been some of our most wise physicians, who have given us ideas and techniques that merit sharing with future generations. In the end, the selection of content is mine, based on four decades of experience in medical practice and teaching.

To continue with the “oral history” thought mentioned above, this book tells examples of medical lore passed from senior to junior clinician, from teacher to pupil, from mentor to mentee. Actually, we should hope that the precepts, methods, and wise words are being passed on, but such is not always
the case. For both young and older physicians, the days are often too busy for reflective discourse and for “tales told around the campfire.” What’s more, with the proliferation of scientific knowledge, there seems to be scant time to share the wisdom of medicine. Hence, in some ways, what you will read in the coming pages represents what you may not have learned in medical school and residency, or what may sometimes be accorded low priority amid the demands of daily practice.

This book is written for physicians. Yet, the content is pertinent to all clinicians. For the medical student, resident in training and physician in early practice, nurse and physician assistant who provide patient care, the concepts presented can help avoid clinical misadventures and potentially painful experiential learning. Even if you have been in practice for two or three decades, this book is sure to present some approaches to healthcare you have not previously considered, and it will help satisfy your curiosity as to whether or not your daily practice of medicine is consistent with that of the wise physicians.

Of course, with time some advice needs to be tweaked a little to bring it up to date with twenty first century medicine. For example, in 1903, Sir William Osler advocated bedside teaching as a radical reform in teaching medical students. Yet today, with short, focused hospital stays often measured in hours and with many alternative venues for patient care, teaching is more likely to occur in the physician’s office, emergency department of the hospital, operating room, or even the patient’s home or nursing home. For this reason, I have presented timeless maxims, supported by examples that relate to today’s practice. Also, in the case of personal practice anecdotes, I have disguised names and circumstances to protect patient confidentiality, while trying not to lose the flavor of the stories.

I urge you to read Medical Wisdom and Doctoring for personal enrichment. You will find some quotes from Hippocrates and Pogo, Albert Schweitzer and Charles Barkley (yes, the basketball player Charles Barkley), Louis Pasteur and Little Orphan Annie. You will learn the success secrets of Applebee’s Restaurants, the back-story of Joseph
Lister and Listerine, and the identity of the role model for Sherlock Holmes. Yet, for those who just must be learning something “useful,” I have included some hard-core clinical pearls, such as the tip-off that can alert you when a patient may be developing herpes zoster ophthalmicus, the best way to test for diabetic peripheral neuropathy, what to consider when you encounter a unilateral right-sided varicocele, and the significance of pleuritic-type chest pain radiating to the left shoulder and relieved by leaning forward. I would be honored if some forward-thinking medical school professor designates this book as a required course text, but I have stopped short of providing details of how to diagnose and treat specific ailments.

The aphorism “Medicine is not only a science; it is also an art” is attributed to medieval physician Paracelsus (1493–1591)\(^2\) and more than anything, this book is about the art of medicine. And so, what you hold in your hand is intended to be read on a quiet evening beside an open fire, on a long plane ride, or perhaps as something to ease the tedium of a night in the on-call room, because it presents concepts that should be savored when you have time for thoughtful reflection.

Now settle in and enjoy Medical Wisdom and Doctoring.

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REFERENCES

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