

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Twelve Patients: A Book Review

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## ABSTRACT

Twelve Patients weaves the stories of twelve patients to tell the geopolitical stories of Americans, both those born here and elsewhere. At the epicenter of immigration, New York City and Bellevue Hospital serves as a testament to public health in America over the past century. It mirrors the challenges new immigrants have, by documenting their health challenges. Amidst these case studies, Dr. Eric Manheimer offers geopolitical commentary on mental health in America, Latin American geopolitical issues, palliative care, and international infectious disease. He is a clinical professor of medicine at the New York University School of Medicine, and served as the medical director at Bellevue Hospital for fourteen years. Fifteen years of handwritten journals of thoughts, incidents, ideas, case studies and conversations culminated into these twelve chapters, focusing on twelve patients.

### Keywords:

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**Introduction:****Background:**

Many hospital nurses have seen a physician round on the weekends with their child in tow. Those children are often quiet, with big eyes absorbing the hospital setting, staff, and patient interactions. Being a child in an adult environment alone is enough to arouse wonder, and real life drama can hardly compare to TV. The nurses know that the memories etched on those nights and weekends will not soon be forgotten. Dr. Eric Manheimer is the son of a physician from the Bronx, and described “the sounds, smells, and rhythms of medicine entered my primitive brain’s limbic system. I had no choice- medicine was my passion” (Manheimer, 2012, p. 3). Dr. Manheimer served at Bellevue hospital for more than 15 years and, *Twelve Patients* is his narrative of life as both a physician, and citizen of the world. His deep commitment to his community, and profession, is obvious. In many of the stories, he follows up years later, and continues to keep in touch with many patients and their families. Also clear is the author’s commitment to his family, and his tone is consistent in describing his patients as family throughout the book, *Twelve Patients*.

The author relays twelve case studies in as many chapters, and uses each as a platform to denounce violence and political inequity the world over. This medical case studies interest the medically minded reader. Likewise, his case illustrations demonstrate shortcomings in health policy on a local and international scale. These examples of social injustice are easily digested for any reader interested in nation health policy, regardless of medical background. The author adeptly weaves a political agenda of worldwide humanitarianism and emigration, with medical cameos.

Bellevue Hospital is an urban hospital that serves an international community in New York City, from the indigent to the upper class. The contrast is illustrated when Rikers Island prisoners as well as diplomats at the nearby United Nations both utilize Bellevue Hospital. One case outlines strategic planning with the United Nations in the event of medical emergencies. Another meeting takes place with the Mexican minister of health. Bellevue has a partnership with the Mexican consulate to provide health care for Mexican immigrants who total 500,000 in the New York metropolitan area.

Bellevue Hospital is the oldest hospital in country, at 275 years. It has several thousand beds, 7000 employees, and many firsts, among them: the

first maternity ward, pediatric ward, C-section, child psychiatry unit, and cardiac pacemaker. Psychiatry remains a leading specialty, and a self-contained mental health hospital exists within it’s walls. It is a worldwide leader in treating drug addiction, and also for emergency medicine. There is a 100-bed Rikers prison unit, which has a unique set of public health concerns.

In addition to all of these credits, Bellevue has always been on the cutting edge public health. Due to necessity of serving the underserved, HIV, TB, and lethal flu epidemics were all treated with cutting edge care at Bellevue. They are on the medical frontier, leading to the development of health policy and medical protocols. Terrorist and national security policies have been developed due to the metropolitan location near the United Nations. More than a century ago, the hospital started by serving the poor, and had a reputation for rats and sordid care in the previous century. There is a famous oil painting hanging in the New York Museum with female patients at Bellevue, 1860, lying in bed covered in rats.

The poor level of care improved due to fervent devotion to the underserved among staff, and caught the attention of everyone else along the way.

Dr. Manheimer, the chief medical officer, makes a point to state that he and his family received their own care at Bellevue Hospital. It was important to the author that the staff witnesses this, as if to justify that his financially privileged family use this crowded, incredibly busy institution.

It is a constant challenge to fight public health budgets and maintain a prestigious trauma center, as well as so many renowned specialties. Dr. Manheimer laments the physician who becomes “obsessed with lab values and rituals” (Manheimer, 2012, p. 7), divided from the patient by a computer. Interestingly, Dr. Manheimer left Bellevue the year *Twelve Patients* was published, and is now an administrator at New York University Medical Center. His biography also lists medical director with an electronic health record company, despite his lamentations about technology.

Key among the recurring themes in this manuscript are social injustices due to race, education, geopolitics and socio-economic status. Most of the twelve patients are immigrants. There is an ongoing contrast between their life prior to immigration, their current illness, and sequellae from that illness. Geopolitics by definition is a method of foreign policy analysis based the effect of international politics on

power distribution, health, and social stability of populations. Early portions of the book revolve around a Latin American theme. Married to a professor of Latin American studies, Dr. Manheimer weaves a variety of Central and South American history into this book.



Eric Manheimer is especially sympathetic to the plight of Mexican nationals, and extensively reviews his wife's ties to Chihuahua, Mexico when relating a story about Octavio Salcedo. Salcedo's hometown Morelos, near Chihuahua, was destined to die, due to exodus to the U.S. for better jobs. Following the NAFTA trade agreement, entire industries collapsed. Agricultural subsidies were prohibitive to the Mexican farmer. Octavio and his wife left their three small children, and fled to New York City in hopes of a better life. After diagnosis with a life limiting cancer, Mr. Salcedo opted to return to Mexico to die. He chose a painful death, without the aid of modern medicine. He chose the comfort of a known space surrounded by family, versus morphine administered by foreign-tongued strangers in a sterile New York hospital. To many this choice might seem unimaginable, yet Dr. Manheimer uses this story to illustrate the pull of homeland, as evidenced by this patient's final flight home. In order to transport this patient home, the author and his wife incredulously accompany him on the plane to tend to his medical needs. Imagine the contrast, from the controlled hum of an intensive care unit, to a crowded rural home without medications physically, or financially, available. This demonstrates a cataclysmic shift in care, which is foreign to Americans- from aggressive daily debridement for his rotting cancerous tumors, to the relatively common third world experience of dying without morphine. The local medical officers could offer nothing, yet the patient was at peace dying in his homeland.

Other Latin American geopolitical stories are used to demonstrate social inequities. *Twelve Patients* especially focuses on tyrants and dictators over the past 40 years, and the repercussions of emigrants, their children, and grandchildren. The author speculates that "in two years, New York will become completely Latinized, rift with associated problems; including failing infrastructure, under

supported educational, and health programs" (Manheimer, 2012, p. 301).

For example, Alicia was a beaten woman from Argentina's Dirty War. Diana Taylor, the author's wife, is incidentally an expert on this time period. The details of Alicia's past eluded Dr. Manheimer for years as he cared for her. Finally, when Alicia was nearly dead in a coma, her son Isaac outlined her history. Alicia was orphaned at birth after her real parents, Jewish journalists, were kidnapped and killed. High-ranking military families sought children to adopt, and despite the child's questions about her heritage, the adoptive family hid the truth from her for years. A cycle of violence continued through her life. She perpetually made bad choices in relationships, until she was nearly killed by an abusive husband. One criticism of this book is that Alicia's story ends abruptly, as so many of the twelve chapters and case studies in this book. The reader carefully learns of Alicia's troubled past, and yearns for a glimpse of her, hopefully, brighter future. It is common in hospital medicine to have a lack of follow up.

Dr. Manheimer often parallels his own experience and personal struggles to his patients' struggles: He states similar situations but a world apart. He shares a memory about growing up in the Bronx; blocks away from a patient who was beaten, stabbed and held hostage by her own husband. He states, "My patients were like persistent afterimages, burned into my retinas. I could channel them into the consultation room" (Manheimer, 2012, p. 293). Likewise, Dr. Manheimer is critically acclaimed for sharing his personal experience fighting throat cancer. He uses this journey deep into the land of oncology treatment, and compares it to a prison inmate, Juan Guerra, with the same diagnosis. "The first thing I noticed about him was his neck, which I registered from twenty-five yards away... I had a fair sense of what his future possibilities might be, his chances of making it very slim" (Manheimer, 2012, p. 6). In an effort to have a positive impact on the patient's limited life expectancy, Dr. Manheimer was able to advocate for Mr. Guerra's early release from prison, and indicts the inept penitentiary system administration repeatedly in this tome. The three strikes law is ridiculed when applied to this non-violent Vietnam Veteran, who innocently started heroin as an enlisted serviceman, and was unable break a lifetime habit. The author advocates for leniency for non-violent offenders, and goes so far as to state that the District Attorney's scorecard was about putting prisoners behind bars, not releasing them (Manheimer, 2012). Instead of compassionate terms, the author presents the case in cost-effective

terms. Dr. Manheimer advocates passionately that psychiatric patients need attentive, financed mental health care, and violent offenders need to be locked away. It still took more than a month of proactive action in order for the State of New York to grant release, and required high level favors and threats to complete. It is admirable in Guerra's case study, and others, how heavily the doctor relies on his nurses for their excellent judgment, and trusts them to triage his time constantly in a hectic environment. When questioned, Bellevue Staff cite the "resilience of their patients no matter what happens to them. It is the patients" that inspire staff (Manheimer, 2012, p. 326).

Later in the story, after Mr. Guerra's withdrawal from treatment, the physician author admits his discomfort with palliative care, and grapples with the patient's choice. Among physicians, this willingness to explore self-doubt, and possible disconnect between personal and medical goals is admirable, and often herculean, task. He can reflect among physicians an inability to accept an ending, protecting the illusion of power. This power is an illusion, and he relates that the law of physics and the power of entropy, that each physician studies.

It is poignant to see the author's reflections, after filling over 100 notebooks, over thirty years, with his personal reflections and case studies. As the book progresses, Dr. Manheim verbalizes his emotional growth, culminating with the observation that "a measure of maturity is when the humanity of the people that walk through our doors becomes part of your own... our own humanity is at stake" (Manheimer, 2012, p. 109 and 326). This reader was struck by the integrity and self-awareness represented in this quote. Bellevue is known for it's tough luck cases: high profile trauma, criminal cases, psychiatric care, and indigent health care. After a long career in public health, this doctor is able to verbalize the core of resilience in his hospital staff. Woven throughout this narrative is the strong spirit of family at Bellevue, and endearment truly felt by the author for his staff.

It seems his greatest honor was being summoned to the bedside of an ill coworker's mother and daughter, which truly represents all that is good and pure about a family. In the midst of this touching tale, the author cleverly uses his coworker Marta's voice to lament exclusive soda contracts, and baby formula subsidies to the poor discouraging breastfeeding.

Dr. Eric Manheimer has the distinct pleasure of caring for his international community, his coworkers, and their loved ones. Through 15 years of patient care, he carefully transcribed conversations,

impression and details that are immensely interesting to the reader, both lay-people and medically inclined. Moreover, he uses the platform of the book, *Twelve Patients*, to further international public health causes. Dr. Manheimer tells a great story, and also speaks for powerless international refugees who have no voice. There is no greater professional reward.