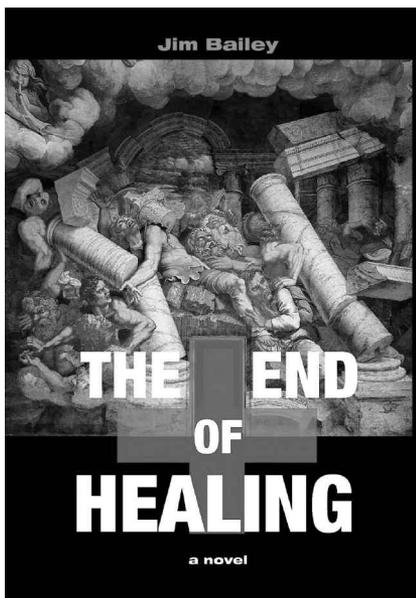


SIGN OF THE TIMES: PART II

Why We Should Share Our Stories: Confessions of a Physician-Novelist

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By day I am a professor, researcher, physician, and author of journal articles. By night I write fiction. It took more than 10 years to complete my first novel and to gather the courage to announce its publication. For those of you who have closeted your own creative writing, perhaps my story will encourage you to come out as well.

My own awakening to the need for general internal medicine physicians to tell their stories happened at the beginning of the new millennium in early 2000. That year, the prestigious Institute of Medicine released its famous report titled *To Err is Human*. It documented that 100,000 Americans are killed by medical errors in hospitals every year, making medical errors the number-one cause of accidental death in America. It came as no surprise to those in my scientific discipline—health systems research—that our system was badly broken. Even so, solutions were available. We knew how to prevent these needless medical mistakes, but we weren't doing it. To us it was a relief that the word was finally out. I fully expected an outraged American public to demand immediate action.

To my dismay, nothing happened. The few people who heard about the report didn't believe it. After all, every American knew that the United States had "the best health care in the world." Americans were truly in

the dark. I realized that I could publish hundreds of journal articles in prestigious journals every year and still it wouldn't wake the American people up to the truth about modern medicine. Statistics wouldn't do it. People needed a story.

So in 2004 I began to write my first novel, *The End of Healing*, to let Americans see their own stories through the eyes of a young doctor who reveals the tragic reality they have been hiding from. On 9–11 it dawns on my protagonist Dr. Don Newman that more than enough people to fill a jumbo jet are killed every day by medical missteps in America, that hospitals are more than five times more dangerous than our most deadly roadways, and that Americans are shelling out extraordinary sums for low quality healthcare—amounts that have now grown to more than \$25,000 a year for the average family of four and \$50,000 dollars a year for the average Medicare-age family of two. He and his fellow students in an Ivy League graduate school program for health system science are stunned

when they realize that although Americans think they are getting the best care available for their money, more than a third of their health care spending goes for scams to pay middlemen and proceduralists for dangerous care they don't even need.

The End of Healing tells the stories of our patients and loved ones who have struggled to get the care they need most, who have seen things go terribly wrong after entering the hospital, and who assumed their bad experiences were rare aberrations—not business as usual. These are the difficult stories that our patients need to hear from us: stories of patients who've been misled to think their lives were saved by dangerous care—like radiation or coronary artery stents—that actually did more harm than good; stories of medical errors like Dennis Quaid's newborn twins who almost died because the hospital confused adult and pediatric blood thinner bottles and gave 10,000 times the recommended dose; and stories of industry injustice and greed like the husband who loses his beloved wife because his insurance company canceled their policy in the middle of her potentially life-saving chemotherapy treatments and who realizes that his years of health insurance policy payments went for caviar and five-hundred-dollar-a-bottle champagne for executives who got fat bonuses to

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reject claims and prevent payouts.

The End of Healing tells many of these dark stories—ones we have all experienced and hidden from view through the years. For the good of our patients, it is time to bring these stories out. We should share our darkest stories because they expose America's greatest injustices entrenched where we least expect them—in our hallowed halls of healing. We need young heroes like Dr. Don Newman for our patients to follow through the darkness of the modern health care industry so they can understand how and where they are being scammed. We need our patients to

understand the ills of our health care system with a clarity that the best ad men from the insurance companies and hospitals of Wall Street cannot shake. If we muster the courage to tell our difficult stories, it will embolden our patients to tell their own stories. Perhaps they will finally begin to demand the kinds of high-value primary and preventive care they need most.

This is my call to action for SGIM members. Share your stories of modern medicine's greatest harms and its greatest heroes. Encourage your patients to wake up, open their eyes to the truth, and follow our greatest heroes of health system transforma-

tion. Encourage your patients to join in partnership with us—their primary care physicians—and follow Dr. Newman through the dark underworld of the health care industry to look and find something better for themselves, their families, and America.

To share your story of the dark side of American medicine and of the healing heroes you have witnessed leading the path to improving care, go to www.EndofHealing.com/share-your-story. Or if you want to talk with a recently “out-of-the-closet” writer to help you gather your courage to tell your story, contact me at jim@thehealthycity.org.

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