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Title:

Robin Downie, *Quality of Life: A Post-Pandemic Philosophy of Medicine*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2021; 240pp. ISBN 978-1-788-36059-3 (pbk). £14.95. Foreword by Sir Kenneth Calman.

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Abstract:

Robin Downie's latest book is a well-timed treatise on reconceiving health care provision after SARS-CoV-2, articulating a philosophy of medicine in the sense of a revisionary manifesto for "resetting priorities in medical research and the ways of tackling the ill-health of individuals and communities." The book is structured in terms of three philosophical critiques of aspects of the 'ethos of medicine' that are resistant to change: medicine and science; medicine and ethics; and medicine as an inward-looking field. The first part sets out the contrast between Hippocratic and Asklepian approaches, the second part turns to the value of the arts and humanities, the third part argues that clinical medicine as a self-enclosed field should be more outward-facing, and the fourth and final part discusses health as a social, relational, and community-oriented 'good'. Taking up a position against liberal individualism, the author is critical of a health care model predicated on individual autonomy and rights; and while conceding that the ability to make a choice "is arguably the most important factor" for a meaningful life, in the end he concludes against its ultimate necessity.

Robin Downie's latest book is a well-timed treatise on reconceiving health care provision after SARS-CoV-2. Grounded in philosophical reflection but written for a wider readership, it draws together themes from the author's body of writing on medicine and its relation to ethics, values, what it means to live 'well', the arts and humanities, education, professionalism, health policy, and society.

These are intertwined in a form intended to "fit the changed medical and social circumstances we find ourselves in after the pandemic." Beyond scholarly sources, the discussion also interacts with poetry, art, drama, and classic as well as popular fiction, but does not set out to engage with current pandemic literature, for that is not the purpose of this book.

Rather, it articulates a philosophy of medicine in the sense of a revisionary manifesto for "resetting priorities in medical research and the ways of tackling the ill-health of individuals and communities." Fittingly, the cover design depicts two backpackers standing on a cliffside, a face mask in hand, as they greet the sun on the horizon rising above the sea, heralding a new post-pandemic day.

Quality of Life is structured as three philosophical critiques of aspects of the 'ethos of medicine' that are resistant to change: medicine and science (including the centrality of the individual consultation); medicine and ethics; and medicine as an inward-looking field. It engages with the moral tension between the individual and the many, and concludes with proposals in terms of community and personal 'good'.

The first part sets out the contrast between Hippocratic and Asklepian approaches: a medical focus on external intervention, and a medical focus on what comes from within; that which is based on the objectively scientific, and that which is based on the subjectively humanistic. Downie brings these together in an 'all-things-considered' conception of the practice of medicine, not least in ethical clinical judgement.

Following his critique of a distinctly 'medical' ethics, the second part turns to the value of the arts and humanities for education in ethics and communication in medicine, and as a critical resource for public policy issues. Downie is careful not to suggest that the humanities can, in themselves, humanise (a position that he rejects in other writing), and stresses that the educational utility of resources from the arts and humanities is purely supplementary.

The third part argues that clinical medicine as a self-enclosed field should be more outward-facing, and that public health medicine should make alliances with community movements, including those that are arts-based. The fourth and final part then takes up the role of the arts and humanities for health in terms of positive well-being. It also highlights social prescribing; health as a social, relational, and community-oriented 'good'; and advocates a communitarian philosophy of health care.

The book as a whole is positioned against what it describes as 'liberal individualism', and here the author is critical of a health care model predicated on individual autonomy and rights. Yet in the context of SARS-CoV-2 we have seen what it looks like in a democracy where individual autonomy is subordinated to ostensible community interests, and the world can testify to the harms that result. Even Edmund Burke, whose political thought in some respects foreshadowed communitarianism, nevertheless declared, "The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion."¹ In the final chapter, citing John Stuart Mill, Downie concedes that the ability to make a choice "is arguably the most important factor" for a meaningful life, but in the end concludes against its ultimate necessity.

Quality of Life is a thought-provoking and accessible book that will stimulate medical readers to revisit the goals of health care provision, especially in the coming dawn of our post-pandemic era.

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The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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References

1. Burke, E. Speech at the County Meeting of Buckinghamshire, held at Aylesbury, 20th March 1784. From Burke's handwritten notes at the Sheffield City Archives collection.