



The Uncertain Art: Thoughts on a Life in Medicine

Sherwin B. Nuland

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“Life is short, and the Art so long; the occasion fleeting; experience fallacious; and judgment difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and the externals, cooperate.”

–attributed to Hippocrates, c. 400 B.C.E.

The award-winning author of *How We Die* and *The Art of Aging*, venerated physician Sherwin B. Nuland has now written his most thoughtful and engaging book. *The Uncertain Art* is a superb collection of essays about the vital mix of expertise, intuition, sound judgment, and pure chance that plays a part in a doctor’s practice and life.

Drawing from history, the recent past, and his own life, Nuland weaves a tapestry of compelling stories in which doctors have had to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. Topics include the primitive (and sometimes illegal) procedures doctors once practiced with good intentions, such as grave robbing and prescribing cocaine as an anesthetic (which resulted in a physician becoming America’s first cocaine addict); the curious “cures” for irregularity touted by people from the ancient Egyptians to the cereal titan John Harvey Kellogg and bodybuilder Charles Atlas; and healers grappling with today’s complex moral and ethical quandaries, from cloning to gene therapy to the adoption of Eastern practices like acupuncture.

Nuland also recounts his most dramatic experiences in a forty-year medical career: the time he was called out of the audience of a Broadway play to help a man having a heart attack (when no other doctor there would respond), and how he formed a profound friendship with an unforgettable—and doomed—heart patient. Behind these inspiring accounts always lie the mysteries of the human body and human nature, the manner in which the ill can will themselves back to health and the odd and essential interactions between a body’s own healing mechanisms and a doctor’s prescriptions.

Riveting and wise, amusing and heartrending, *The Uncertain Art* is Sherwin Nuland’s best work, gems from a man who has spent his professional life acting in the face of ambiguity and sharing what he has learned.

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