

Book Reviews

Where Have We Failed? A Systemic Analysis of US Health Care. By Roger K. Howe. 303 pp. Tampa, Fla, American College of Physician Executives, 2002. \$55.00 (paper). ISBN 0-924674-93-8.

What is wrong with the American health care system? Almost everything. A quick list off the top of my head—insurance companies, managed care, drug companies, Medicare, Medicaid, physicians, overinformed patients, malpractice insurance, lawyers, uninsured patients, and so on. The manifestations are obvious. Physicians are unhappy, patients are unhappy, employers are unhappy, costs are rising to more than \$1 trillion a year, and what do we have to show for it—44 million uninsured and an infant mortality rate that is 28th in the world (ranking lower than the Czech Republic).

Roger Howe's book *Where Have We Failed?* offers a comprehensive accounting of the current state of American health care. Dr. Howe is a family physician turned physician executive. Informed by his experiences with physician groups and health maintenance organizations, he details challenges and dilemmas from several different aspects of the health care system. The book's cover, a large red-encircled letter "F," gives a not-so-subtle hint to the author's primary thesis. He organizes the book into chapters on each of the major players in health care—insurers, purchasers, government, hospitals, lawyers, physicians, patients, media, and drug companies. The discussions are well written and complete, and they offer a fair analysis of the competing demands that face each of these groups. Each chapter is nicely supplemented with endnotes that reveal Dr. Howe's entertaining editorialization.

The problem with the book, and American health care, is that almost everything is broken. If the fixes were easy, they would have been fixed by now. Instead, we are confronted with a growing crisis, one that generates and sucks up an enormous amount of money. After reading the book, I was left with a grave sense of hopelessness—the problems are not just plentiful, but they also run deep into the soul of American history and culture, consumerism, expectations, and independence. Dr. Howe bravely offers potential solutions, but they seem feeble in contrast to the weight of the problem. Even his concluding great new hope—a market-based system that is able to control costs and deliver quality health care—requires "such a complex set of numerous and interrelated actions" that we are left paralyzed under the weight of despair.

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Saunders Review of Family Practice. 3rd edition. By Edward T. Bope and Michael D. Hagen. 367 pp. Philadelphia, WB Saunders, 2002. \$59.95 (paper). ISBN 0-7216-8821-7.

This text is written as a companion study guide to *Rakel's Textbook of Family Practice*. The book contains 67 chapters with titles identical to the 67 chapters in *Rakel's* book and grouped under the same five categories of principles of family practice, family medicine in the community, communication in family medicine, practice of family medicine, and management of the practice. Each chapter typically contains 10 to 30 questions in formats similar to those found on the American Board of Family Practice (ABFP) certification examination, ie, multiple choice and multiple true-false. Each question is followed by the correct answer, a page reference from *Rakel's Textbook of Family Practice*, and a critique, similar to the format used in the *ABFP In-Training Examination Critique Book*. The third edition adds an introductory piece by Lanyard Dial, "Preparing to Take the American Board of Family Practice Examinations."

Saunders Review of Family Practice is unabashedly a preparatory text for the ABFP examination. My only serious criticism is that the new edition, which had been promised for months, was published too late to help those of us who took the recertification examination in July 2002. I had used the previous edition as a review when I recertified 6 years ago and found it extremely helpful. Both the content and format of the questions are extremely realistic. Even though the text can be used as a stand-alone review, it is especially powerful when coupled with *Rakel's Textbook of Family Practice*, because the specific references make efficient guides to further study.

I found the book particularly useful as a review of those conditions I encounter infrequently in my practice and that require knowledge of specific facts I do not keep in my head but that tend to show up on the ABFP examination. After my study of the previous edition, I recall working through the ABFP examination and recognizing a number of answers I would have otherwise missed. Dr. Dial's chapter on test-taking tips is much like the talk he has given at review courses sponsored by the American Academy of Family Physicians. I can personally attest to the value of several of his suggestions to survive the examination.

I have spent limited time using the other board-review texts or comparing *Saunders Review of Family Practice* with similar offerings on the market. From my experience, however, I have a hard time imagining a more useful choice for any family physician preparing to take the ABFP examination. When residents who are about to take the examination for the first time ask me for advice on how to prepare, *Saunders Review of Family Practice* is my standard recommendation.

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