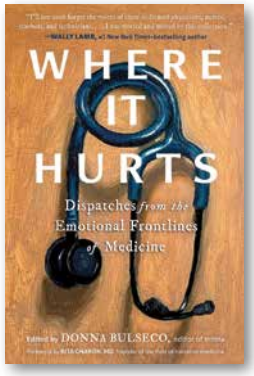
Book reviews

Jack Coulehan, MD, MPH, and Lara Hazelton, MD, Book Review Editors



Where it Hurts: Dispatches from the Emotional Frontlines of Medicine

Edited by Donna Bulseco
The Experiment
2026, 288 Pages

Reviewed by
Justin C. Cordova, MD

> The narratives collected in *Where It Hurts* appeal to our hearts and minds and, we hope, will speed connections between those providing care and those receiving it, making healing a common goal for everyone (p 7).

Though Columbia University has not cornered the market on narrative medicine, it does continue to be at the fore of its development and distribution. The discipline began there in 2000 and was codified into the university's Masters of Science in Narrative Medicine program under the direction of Rita Charon, who introduces this volume and is credited as a founder of the field. One of her department's most lasting contributions was the creation of its flagship publication, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine,* which printed its first issue in 2011. It was later revamped in 2013 when Donna Bulseco assumed the position of editor-in-chief. She has continued in that role ever since, enabling her to provide from *Intima's* pages this memorable collection of essays, poems, and short fiction that demonstrate the continued relevance of the humanities to the provision of humane medical care.

> Narrative practices illuminate lives lived and illness with meaning, with movement, with moments of being. Sometimes hidden, always mysterious, simultaneously understood and misunderstood, illness interrupts the no-illness with an alternative and defining reality (p 1).

Perhaps the best way to describe *Where it Hurts* is as narrative medicine in action. Not only does it showcase the myriad forms available to authors within each genre, but it also gives voice to healthcare professionals representing seemingly every discipline from across the medical field. Emergency medical technicians are featured alongside critical care nurses and pediatric psychiatrists, with levels of experience ranging from entry-level trainees to emeritus professors. These writers' backgrounds are about as diverse as can be imagined, whether regarding ancestral heritage, sexual orientation, or geographic location, lending to the collection a universality that is sure to make it resonate with a broad readership. These pieces take on topics of breathtaking importance, from suicide to stillbirth and from adolescence to autopsies. By juxtaposing poems alongside essays and short stories, readers are led to reflect on topics like racism, patient autonomy, and global health disparities using stimulatingly discrete vantage points.

> I thought, when I became a doctor, that one day I would know the answers, but more and more I feel I am just making motions on the sidelines of other people's tragedies (p 172).

Intima has been a formidable force as a biannual literary journal, but one can expect it to have an even greater impact through this distillation of its best work. These pieces are not only compelling adjuncts to the medical literature, but many are critically acclaimed pieces of writing, including one shortlisted for the *Best American Essays* series and several others written by Puschart Prize nominees. One essay titled "Dr. Ortega and the Fajita Man" addresses dementia with such refreshing humanity that readers may wish to return to the book's early chapters simply to read it over from start to finish. In another piece, an author in desperation looks to Mary Oliver for solace, but is unable to hear her poetic voice amidst the sirens of the COVID-19 pandemic. In still another, a young father writes a series of letters to Noah Webster in search of a word to describe parents whose children died before them. These pieces are by turns heartbreaking and uplifting, encouraging and humbling, but in all ways remain candid and caring. They are poignant in a manner that reminds healthcare providers why they do what they do and how their work is so lastingly essential.

> Birth and death are daily companions, the transitions of both always accompanied by a held breath. You'll hold your breath waiting for that initial cry from a newborn

> … and you'll hold your breath once more as your dying patient slips away under layers of morphine (p 29).

Within the medical humanities, *Where It Hurts* may be used as part of a reflective curriculum or simply as a point of introduction to the power of narrative medicine. The anthology offers a nuanced viewpoint as compared to some of its progenitors like *On Doctoring*[1] and *Poetry in Medicine,*[2] in that each of its authors writes from within the field of medicine. It is even distinct from collections like *Blood & Bone*[3]—one of whose editors has an essay featured in *Where It Hurts*—as its contributors are not wholly from the physician ranks, instead representing perspectives from across the spectrum of professions within the house of medicine. That convergence effectively democratizes narrative practice, allowing the field and this volume to be all the richer for it.

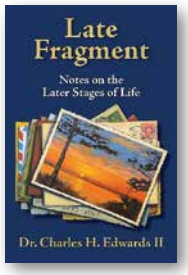
Over the past 15 years, *Intima* has been a beacon for the continued development of the medical humanities. This book-length anthology drawn from its pages is certainly a collection of import for practitioners of medicine, but its raw emotions and heartrending reflections also make it impactful for any readers who have interacted with illness, dying, or death. Both present and future generations of readers may look to these authors for poignant examples of thoughtfully devoted care, making yet another argument for the clinical utility of creative writing. *Where It Hurts* will hold a unique place in the tradition of narrative medicine and will surely be an important voice within the field for many decades to come.

References

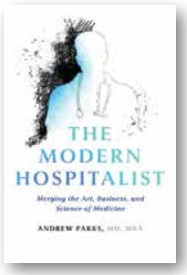
1. Reynolds R, Stone J, eds. *On doctoring: Stories, poems, essays.* 3rd ed. Simon & Schuster; 2010.
2. Salcman M, ed. *Poetry in medicine: An anthology of poems about doctors, patients, illness, and healing.* Persea Books; 2015.
3. Belli A, Coulehan J, eds. *Blood and bone: Poems by physicians.* University of Iowa Press; 1998.

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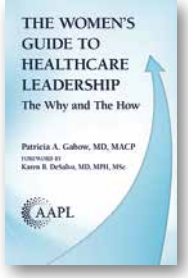
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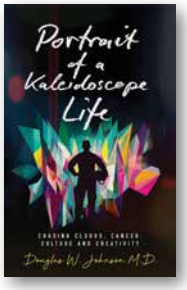
Late Fragment: Notes on the Later Stages of Life
Charles H. Edwards II, MD (AΩA, University of North Carolina, 1973); United Writers Press, November 2, 2023; 228 pages.
We sincerely apologize to Dr. Edwards for the error in our Summer 2026 issue, in which his induction institution and year were published incorrectly.



The Modern Hospitalist: Merging the Art, Business, and Science of Medicine
Andrew Parks, MD, MBA (AΩA, University of Kentucky College of Medicine, 2015); Advantage Media Group, October 27, 2026, 250 pages.



The Women's Guide to Healthcare Leadership: The Why and The How
Patricia A. Gabow, MD, MACP (AΩA, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, 1969); American Association for Physician Leadership, August 28, 2026, 263 pages.



Portrait of a Kaleidoscope Life (Chasing Clouds, Cancer, Culture, & Creativity)
Douglas William Johnson, MD, FACR (AΩA, Medical College of Virginia, 1979); Ten Hut Media, May 13, 2025, 368 pages.