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Breaking Little Bones: Triumph And Trauma, The First Cures Of Childhood Leukemia



Synopsis

In this profound, complex story, G. Bennett Humphrey, MD, PhD, chronicles his year on 2 East, a pediatric leukemia floor. Doctors are fighting a presumed mortality rate of 100 percent, but the cost of finding a cure weighs heavily on their hearts. The cure rate for the children of 2 East in 1964 will turn out to be 15 percent. With almost no training in pediatrics and no experience with chemotherapy, the author confronts an entirely different world. From the beginning he is amazed by the strength of the mothers, the compassion of the nurses, and the admirable ways the children themselves cope with this devastating illness. *Breaking Little Bones* combines the personal and the scientific in poignant moments. It is both an overview of the revolutionary medical progress made in treating acute lymphocytic leukemia in 1964 and an honest narrative of what it was like to be there. Humphrey knew these kids. He knew Todd, who loved words, and Polly, who held her bald head proudly. He formed a brotherly bond with his team members, and he had to figure out his own unique way to cope with the grief. This transformative look into one of the most heartbreaking areas of medicine digs deep, revealing what we can learn about truly living from those facing an early death.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

G. Bennett Humphrey, MD, PhD, completed his graduate studies in medicine and biochemistry at the University of Chicago. Following the events of this book, he retrained in pediatrics, with oncology and hematology as his subspecialties. He taught pediatric oncology at a number of universities, including as a visiting professor in Japan, Europe, and the United States. Over his career Humphrey has written numerous articles and chapters and has edited several pediatric oncology books. In

2013 his chapbook entitled *The Magpie Cried*, containing poems about his youth, was published. That year he was named Senior Poet Laureate of Colorado. Three short stories from this book have been published previously, two by Whispering Angel Press and the other by Johns Hopkins University Press. Humphrey currently splits time between his apartment in Boulder, Colorado, and a cabin in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains at ninety-three hundred feet, just north of the New Mexico border.

Breaking Little Bones: Triumph and Trauma, the First Cures of Childhood Leukemia by G Bennett Humphrey was both a heart-wrenching and endearingly hopeful story of a young doctor's time on the children's leukemia ward at NIH in 1964. The book is an account of important clinical trials that were integral in curing childhood leukemia, but more than that, it's a story of the human spirit. The children and families of 2 East were brought to life in stunningly aching detail. As a mother, I wanted to cuddle each child and console their courageous mothers. Having worked with nurses, I was unsurprised, and yet still awed, by the devotion and care that the ward nurses had for their patients and colleagues. Dr. Humphrey, as an internist, was unprepared and out of his league for his year-long stint as a clinical associate on 2 East. What I loved most about Humphrey's account is the honest look he took at his own part of the story. Humphrey and his colleagues survive the year through camaraderie, humor, and, in Humphrey's case, poetry and horses. At times they are angry or indignant, heartbroken or despondent, but mostly kind, caring, and concerned, which speaks mountains to the strength of character of each doctor. Humphrey considers the people with whom he interacted, from fellow doctors to the patients themselves, thoughtfully and with great humility. Despite the subject matter, the book is easy to read and Humphrey develops each character with depth, paying lasting tribute to the children, the families and the medical personnel who were tasked with making terrible and often objectionable medical decisions in the name of the greater good. It's not a medical book (well, it is, but it's not), it's a fascinating and thought-provoking look at humanity in the face of adversity.

Don't let the title fool you—the author does not sentimentalize his time on a children's leukemia ward in the 1960s, when researchers were only on the brink of developing effective treatments for the disease. Nor does he shy away from emotion, however, as he describes this pivotal stop along his long career as a child oncologist. As a young clinical associate with no experience in pediatrics of any kind, balancing objectivity and emotion is just one

of many challenges this provocative memoir illustrates. The young M.D./Ph.D must also learn to follow research protocol—“flawed as it might have been at the time--while still humanely treating individual children; he must learn to communicate with families as well as terminally ill children; and he must learn to balance his own all-consuming career with at least some semblance of a personal life, including a few attempts at dating, and more successful bonds with animals who play a major role in his reflections and overall well-being. The narrative deftly moves among these various threads, culminating in a complete portrayal of a young physician as he navigates his path in medicine. Anyone in the medical field will appreciate the methodical descriptions of the many complex decisions that the clinical associates and researchers faced on a day-to-day basis; and the rest of us might begin to respect the dedication and sacrifice that doctors, nurses, and others still make for us today.

In this book Ben Humphrey reminisces about the 1963/64, when he was a clinician at NIH during his military service. He was assigned to the floor for newly-diagnosed children with ALL. (Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia was a deadly disease.) He was confronted with two highly-charged endeavors: caring for sick children, although he lacked training in pediatrics, and meeting the strict requirements of the first clinical research program intended to conquer the disease. The book is interesting for a general audience, and is definitely recommended for medical professionals. The personal style enlivens and elucidates a pivotal moment in the treatment of childhood cancer.

Dr. Humphrey reminds us of the indestructible spirit of his little patients and their families who faced childhood leukemia in the 1960's. It is a story of compassion, strength, and courage which leads to medical history. Today, when the future of healthcare is in question and medical research is met with cynicism, Humphrey's book inspires us to keep moving forward. *Breaking Little Bones* is an amazing read which encompasses almost every emotion of the human heart.

This book is a way to jump start your feelings of humanity. It is a roller coaster of emotions, from tears to laughter. It is also a clear history of early cancer research. Medical terms are presented for everyone to understand. The exacting details of daily life in research and the time and places of the setting are carefully drawn. Every reader will feel as if they are right there on 2 East at NIH and in Montgomery County Maryland in the mid 60s.

This book presents a triumph and breakthrough in the treatment of childhood leukemia. It is an

amazing account of the researchers and their patients in the early days of chemotherapy for leukemia. It is of great historical significance in that the methods used lead to cures but they could not be used today due to the restraints of Institutional Review Boards and informed consent. It is a fascinating read.

Beautifully told, a young doctor's coming to grips with cancer and the children who braved it.

This fascinating memoir opens a window to the world of 1964 and 1965, the early days of chemo protocols to treat childhood leukemia. The author gives us a front row seat and we feel his pain as he treats a series of children suffering through chemo cycles for one last promise of a cure. I had to put this book down numerous times, but I was always drawn back into it. While the story is dark, within the sadness lies hope and love. This is a challenging but worthwhile read.

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