

Get Well Soon: Adventures in Alternative Healthcare

Nick Duerden

Bloomsbury, 2018, PB, 272pp, £8.57, 978-1472950482



CHRONIC FATIGUE FROM THE INSIDE

'An irritating enigma' is a description of chronic fatigue syndrome quoted by the author, but 'irritating' is the last adjective that could be applied to his book. Rather, it is engaging, entertaining, thoughtful, and moving, and it goes a long way to demystifying the enigma it explores.

Nick Duerden was, in 2009, a successful self-employed journalist, thriving on frenetic activity and, by his own admission, prone to 'a little harmless competition'. His hectic lifestyle came to a sudden halt following a bout of severe flu-like illness contracted in the US, launching him into a new existence in which debilitating fatigue overshadowed everything else. His book, which in itself would prove to be part of his therapy, tells the story of his attempts to understand his condition and his search for a cure.

It comes as no surprise that the NHS was unable to offer much help, and neither his GP nor the specialist to whom he is first referred — whom he tellingly dubs Dr Dolittle — emerge with much credit. He is diagnosed as having post-viral fatigue but is advised to follow the guidance offered to those labelled as having full-blown ME/CFS, an arguable error of judgement of which, later in his narrative, he makes perhaps too much. In any case it transpires that he is not depressed enough to qualify for CBT on the NHS (and no one seems to have given him any detailed advice about graded exercise therapy, the other NICE-approved treatment), so, with the help of his long-suffering and admirably determined wife, he sets out to find his own solutions.

By nature something of a sceptic, he wisely avoids the wilder shores of alternative medicine, apart from some dubious nutritional supplements, focusing instead

on therapies that aim to transcend the mind-body dualism of which mainstream medicine is so often accused. Over the years that follow he takes up various forms of yoga and meditation, spending a small fortune with various outfits — some wackier than others, and many founded and run by recovered sufferers of CFS with messianic zeal and an eye for commercial success. He passes up the offer of a day with a celebrated 'motivational guru' at the discounted price of £6000.

His investigations finally lead him, via explanations of the stress-adrenaline-cortisol axis, to the reluctant acceptance that there might be some psychological factors involved in his collapse into crippling fatigue, not only relating to his lifestyle but also to his childhood. At the same time he learns strategies for dealing with his day-to-day symptoms and the demands of parenting a young family as well as keeping up with his work, and he manages to convey the sensations of extreme fatigue with powerful imagery.

Duerden employs a light touch, and his gentle pokes at some of the more outrageous practitioners he meets is matched by his self-deprecation. But his purpose is serious, and he does not shy away from sharing painful insights and experiences. On the whole though he is generous in his opinions, and his open-mindedness extends to both the orthodox and the alternative. Towards the end of his explorations he spends an hour with Susie Orbach, of *Fat is a Feminist Issue* fame, and is clearly struck by her undogmatic wisdom, as she gently explains her psychoanalytical perspective on his story. What finally emerges is the uncertainty that we all feel when faced with the challenge of a chronic condition with psychosomatic components.

To disentangle the predisposing, precipitating, and perpetuating factors becomes almost impossible, but the attempt is surely worthwhile. This book will appeal to anyone with an interest in chronic fatigue — doctor, patient, or involved observer — whose opinions on this most puzzling of conditions are not already fixed.

Dougal Jeffries,
Retired GP, Falmouth.

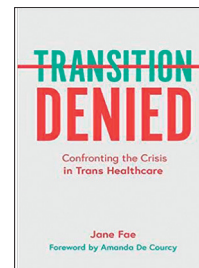
Email: dougal6@gmail.com

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Transition Denied: Confronting the Crisis in Trans Healthcare

Jane Fae

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A PLEA FOR UNDERSTANDING

Transition Denied tells the story of a young transgender woman called Synestra who has difficulty navigating the often misunderstood world of being a transgender. It is the story of an intelligent young woman trying to define herself who unfortunately went spiralling downhill into drugs and sex work, and who ultimately met a tragic death from an overdose at a young age.

There is not a clear reason given why Synestra went into drugs and sex work despite her supportive and comfortable upbringing in a middle-class family and supportive environment at school. There was no suggestion either that being transgender was a reason, but a toxic clubbing subculture has certainly contributed to her involvement in sex work and drugs. What was apparent is that there was little help offered to Synestra from the medical community.

This book pleads to the medical community to do more to provide better care for transgender people and not neglect their needs. There is also a plea for better understanding and awareness in trans issues for the public at large and school communities, and this book also suggests ways to help and provide a better support system.

Transition Denied is written by a third party from a grieving mother's point of view trying to make sense of her daughter's transgender journey and her tragic early death. Synestra's journey should not go unacknowledged. It is a recommended read for a better understanding of a transgender person and shows the barriers that a transgender person has to negotiate.

Kamilla Kamaruddin,
GP Partner, East One Health Surgery, London.

Email: kamilla.kamaruddin@nhs.net

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