

BOOK REVIEW

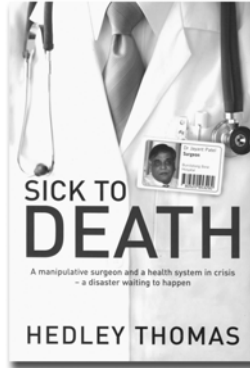
Exposing Bundaberg's Dr Death

Sick to death. Hedley Thomas. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007 (ix + 427 pp, \$29.95). ISBN 978 1 74114 881 7.

TYPICALLY, JOURNALISTS WRITE readable books; even journalism textbooks are easy to follow. So it is with Hedley Thomas' story of Bundaberg Hospital's saga with Dr Jayant Patel. The journalist credited with publicly exposing the discredited surgeon (and more importantly, the terrible deficiencies of the Queensland public health system) leads us on a trail of discovery, ineptitude, political chicanery and tragedy.

The tragedy lies with the patients who put their trust in both their local hospital and Patel, then Director of Surgery, a trust that was shattered and will take a generation to repair. There is a terrible poignancy in the level of personal harm suffered and documented in the book.

The ineptitude is staggering: from the local hospital administration up to the highest levels of Queensland Health. In retrospect, how easy it would have been to avoid much of the scandal by conducting a proper investigation into Patel rather than trying to cover up the truth. Instead, here is a tale which harmed almost everyone who came in contact with it. Thomas chronicles rather than analyses as he exposes how a thriving



department of surgery was destroyed by an appalling administrative culture and turned into Patel's fiefdom.

Thomas is mostly, but not always, accurate. He relies a little too much on National Party gossip instead of checking facts. Gastroenterologists would no doubt be astonished to learn that they are the most qualified practitioners to perform oesophagectomies, Patel's signature procedure.

At the end of 427 pages, one has to reflect on whether there are any winners. Many Bundaberg patients are still waiting for compensation, surgical waiting lists are no better, and institutional reform of Queensland Health is still required. Burdensome

legislation makes medical registration and quality assurance in Queensland inefficient and insidious. There were no political winners, except, perhaps, the incumbent state government. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...*

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