

BOOK REVIEW

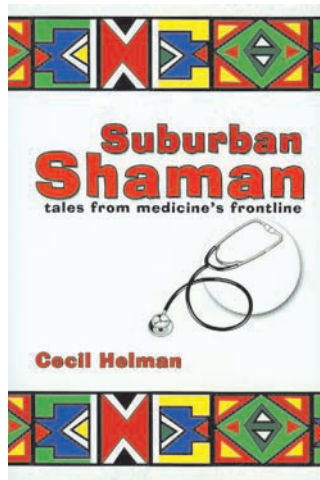
Wisdom out of Africa

Suburban shaman: tales from medicine's frontline.
Cecil Helman. London: Hammersmith Press, 2006
(197 pp, \$21.80). ISBN 1 905 14008.

THIS SHORT BOOK is one of those which, once started, is difficult to put down. Helman's storytelling is supreme as he recounts his experiences as a medical student in apartheid South Africa, and his journey to London to rid himself of the shackles of medicine and seek solace in anthropology and poetry. But of necessity, he became a general practitioner in suburban London, and herein lies the strength of his story — his insights into his experiences from medical and anthropological viewpoints, with a fair sprinkling of self-analysis.

Suburban shaman has 24 short chapters and is divided into three parts: Helman's formative experiences as a medical student in Cape Town, South Africa and his search for a specialty to which he could devote his life; his life as a GP in suburban London; and his views on the art of medicine. All are flavoured by a strong anthropological perspective.

Throughout the book he reflects on traditional healers who capitalise on their patients' inherent strengths — physical, psycho-



logical, social or spiritual — to heal themselves, and argues that conventional medicine has a lot to gain from using these attributes to promote healing and holistic practices. He decries the current pre-eminence of “technomedicine”, with its preoccupation with parts of the human body rather than the whole. He asserts that specialists and “technocrats” have little time for family doctors and their broad, unfocused areas of knowledge, archaic listening skills, collections of medical tales and quaint aphorisms. He reminds us of the strength of the placebo effect in medical practice, and how little this differs from the intent of shamans and other traditional healers. Many of Helman's themes are not new, but the strengths of his book are how he explores these themes, particularly the placebo effect, and how he relates these to everyday practice in clear prose.

Suburban shaman is a must-read book for most doctors and should be compulsory reading for all medical students. I recommend it highly.

Martin B Van Der Weyden

Editor

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