

BOOK REVIEW

Poetry and the art of medicine

Verbal medicine. Twenty-one contemporary clinician-poets of Australia and New Zealand. Tim Metcalf, editor. Canberra: Ginninderra Press, 2006 (148 pp, \$27.50). ISBN 1 74027 369 9.

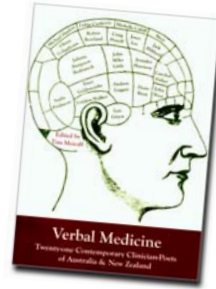
WHEN I SIT on medical curriculum advisory committees, I hear that the subjects studied and examined to gain entry to medical courses, and the courses themselves, have become too focused, too narrow, too mechanistic, too concentrated on sciences and biology. I hear that our students lack sufficient exposure to literature and philosophy to cope with the intense emotional impact of the blessing and the curse that is the life of a doctor. I worry that so many colleagues are at risk of emotional burnout.

It has been said that there is no greater tragedy than an unexamined life.

This book of poems by 21 Australasian clinician-poets is a delight, but it is no light read. I could not read it all in one sitting as each poem is strong and powerful. *Verbal medicine* goes a long way towards examining what it means to be a doctor, and how it feels to deal with the joys and sorrows, frustrations and successes of practice. It does not stop there; painfully, ruthlessly, thoroughly, it examines the role of doctor as patient and mortal human being.

I believe that more doctors should be encouraged to write poems as a way of examining their own lives, and this book is a great example.

The *MJA* editor took a chance on asking me, as a poet, to review a book on poetry. So I cannot let the opportunity pass without a poem of my own.



Why?

Why do we write, why do we dare?
Do we think that there's someone there?
Have we a message, have we a thought?
On a piece of our lives that fortune brought?
Why do we write?
Do we want to be heard?
Or just carve order from the great absurd?
To tear a pain from our inside?
Or see a terror that no more can hide?
To release our anger and give it vent?
Until our passion and frustration's spent?

Or play with words and toy with sound?
And admire the pretty game we've found.

Christopher D Hogan

General Practitioner, Sunbury, VIC