
A 12-YEAR-OLD GIRL is playing the violin. The poet asks if she hears the tunes in her head. "No", she replies, "My fingers know the way, and I follow them". It’s a measure of how much meaning Richard Bronson’s poems can sustain that this glorious, insouciant piece of “found poetry” (the girl presumably said just this) reads as a brief image of the link between body and mind, the physical and the inspirational.

Bronson is an endocrinologist, and this is his first collection of poetry. Some of his work draws directly and successfully on his medical experiences, but most does not. There is a cool intelligence and compassion throughout which one can think of as exemplifying the ideal doctor, but little which fits easily with lazier notions of “medical humanities”. Rather, the driving force is an awareness of cultural heritage. Music and literature are everywhere. The girl, the poet, his late father are all musical, and we learn that Bronson’s library includes Rilke’s magnificent (and fiercely difficult) Duino Elegies and the like.

Indeed, two poems are addressed to Hypatia, murdered by Christian fanatics in 5th century Alexandria and one of the first women of learning whose name we know. The destruction of a civilisation which this event symbolises is at the heart of some bleak meditations for a post 9/11 world:

The world has come to this no heat, no water, no food, but boxes of books in my basement.

The half-dozen love poems with which the volume concludes are serious but occasionally awkward (“a chamber of rules/ where carnal love reigned”), and there are a couple of pieces of whimsy; but Bronson at his best is very much worth reading.

(A video log of Bronson reading four of his poems — rather well — is at <http://www.poetryvlog.com/rbronson.html>, and one of Bronson’s poems was published in the 2 July issue of the Journal Med J Aust 2007; 187: 46.)

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Indigenous health: reaching beyond rhetoric


Forty years have passed since the 1967 referendum on whether Aborigines should be counted in the census. This anniversary led, yet again, to demands for greater effort and tangible improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Then, suddenly, a report on the neglect of children in the Northern Territory provoked action by the federal government. Whether this will help is hard to predict, but the matter certainly has national attention. Right now, at least, some politicians have joined the new President of the Australian Medical Association in making Indigenous health priority number one.

Is a text on the social determinants of Indigenous health relevant to this election-year drama? The book is based on a series of courses funded by the Public Health Education and Research Program (an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing). It provides introductory material that belongs to the cultural curriculum of modern Australia in general, and medical education specifically.

The authors first explain social models of health and epidemiology, and then move on to topics of more or less immediate importance to health status, including racism, poverty, education, employment, welfare, housing, and human rights. These issues were never more relevant than now.

A second question applies more to the average reader of the Journal, concerned with the provision of medical care. What does this book add to the coverage of Indigenous health topics needed by clinicians? These readers will probably turn to the last chapter, on interventions and sustainable programs. Three examples cover “healthy lifestyle”, with a focus on diet, exercise, and smoking cessation; injury prevention and safety promotion; and the measurement of the impact of alcohol and drug treatment programs. The key elements identified are not surprising, including governance, accountability, and appropriate staffing. Any clinician can get involved by contributing to the provision of health services. These examples show that it is possible to reach beyond the current rhetoric of disgrace.

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