





## Critical review



By:

Fernando Augusto Pacífico<sup>1</sup>  Ismael Felipe Gonçalves Galvão<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Medicine of Olinda. Olinda, Pernambuco, Brazil.

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### Marsh H. **Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery.** São Paulo, SP: Nversos, 2017.

Henry Marsh, a renowned British neurosurgeon approaching the end of a long career, shared the triumphs and tragedies of his professional and personal life in “Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery.” In terms of textual production, this is a surprisingly simple and extraordinarily intimate memoir that recalls some of the author’s cases in an elegantly brief work, unraveling the myths that patients have in relation to doctors, unmasking the human and fallible face of neurosurgeons, and the ethical dilemmas and emotional exhaustion that these health professionals go through throughout their careers. The starting point of each chapter is a real-life vignette. He registered the stories of patients with a variety of tumors including glioblastoma, medulloblastoma, pineocytoma, and choroid plexus papilloma (diagnosed in the author’s son).

The narratives are simple yet enlightening and disarming. Many depict situations that can assume seismic proportions. This work tells stories of success and failure involving complex neurosurgical procedures, and attitudes of heroism and feelings of hurt experienced by doctors and patients.

Marsh makes us reflect on the pressure that neurosurgeons are under, as they need to make quick decisions and are surrounded by the constant risk of making mistakes as when he writes “the problem is that when doctors such as myself make mistakes the consequences can be

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#### Correspondence:

Fernando Augusto Pacífico

E-mail:

fapacifico@outlook.com

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catastrophic for our patients.”

The title of the book itself speaks to the duality that neurosurgeons need to deal with in their daily lives. “Do No Harm” refers to the principle of non-maleficence set out in the Latin expression “Primum non nocere”, usually attributed to the Hippocrates of Kós. This principle is often lost when performing neurosurgical procedures. This constant duality experienced by neurosurgeons, sometimes considered superhuman, sometimes villains responsible for usurping the lives of their patients, imposes considerable emotional burden and anguish that makes readers re-signify the prevalent romanticized idea that society has about what medicine is.

Marsh’s maturation over the years is notable, from an arrogant young surgeon to a caring older guru (idealism giving way to pragmatism). Although Marsh has become an extremely pragmatic and rational professional, it is precisely this characteristic that allows him to develop a touching and deep involvement with his patients. It is very easy to write a book just with stories of success and happiness, but it takes a lot of self-confidence and courage to face the failures that are inevitable in the course of anyone’s life.

Marsh’s book is often a lyrical mystery, as when he writes of the brain as “the mysterious substratum of all thought and feeling, of all that was important in human life—a mystery, it seemed to me, as great as the stars at night and the universe around us.”

“Do No Harm” will attract admirers of Atul Gawande, Jerome Groopman, and other medical authors who write expressively on subjects pertinent to the medical profession. Those who have felt the ups and downs in their own lives will relate to the book.

“Do No harm”, in addition to providing an idea of how some neurosurgeries are conducted, offers incredible lessons and touching stories, inviting a deep analysis of medical ethics. Furthermore, Marsh constructs a literary experience of great importance for medical education, as it can be seen as a reality check to support the decision of students who are still uncertain about the career they want to pursue. In fact, the writing style adopted by the author, unlike traditional academic writings, makes the book extremely accessible, light, and pleasant. His engaging writing makes this work an instrument of scientific dissemination that can be used as complementary reading in undergraduate and postgraduate courses and scientific initiation in the area of health sciences.