



# VIEWS AND REVIEWS

## NO HOLDS BARRED

# Margaret McCartney: Reading makes us better doctors

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You can do it alone, on an aeroplane, in the bathroom, or at the end of a shift. You can do it in the garden or in an office. You can squeeze it into bursts of a few minutes or spread it over a long, indulgent day of indolent lounging.

I dislike the call to arms of “all doctors should . . .” but really, all doctors should read. What other occupation is so enlightening, empowering, thought provoking, and yes, infuriating?

The book in the hand is a gift. We have the opportunity for new knowledge. We’re challenged and informed by new perspectives. Our imaginations are coached in ways we’d never thought of.

In the second century AD, Galen wrote that doctors “cannot be hard working if one is continually drinking or eating or indulging in sex, to put it briefly, if one is a slave to genitals and belly.” He doesn’t mention reading, and thus I presume that he approves.

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Reading tells us about other lives that we didn’t even know to consider. Books can explain humanness to us, better and differently. This helps, I think, when we’re at work, under pressure, and without a clear solution to problems, which is often.

It can make us laugh, sigh, lust, and cry. It feeds our mind. It deepens our lives. What greater incitement to reading could there be than the fact that Barack Obama does and Donald Trump does not?

I sat on an interview panel with a doctor who scoured CVs for signs of “reading” listed under “interests.” He liked to scare candidates by then demanding a list of what books they had

most recently assimilated and assessing how intellectual they were. This should not be the point of reading: first, it should be a joy. Detective novels, travel and exploration, literary or science fiction—we can learn from them all.

My spouse, having justified my decades of prolific purchasing because they were “improving books,” has now decreed that I’ve had my lifetime dose. To read them all may take me more years than I have left, but books don’t feel like a material possession. They feel like brain food. The shelves may be full, but the Kindle (secretly) has plenty of storage.

I’m worried by reports that young people aren’t reading as much. I don’t want anyone to miss out on the knowledge, thrill, relaxation, and liberation that reading offers, and maybe we need a nudge.

Perhaps people like me should start to pass on books more generously, rather than saving and (not) dusting them. Or perhaps the internet needs to go down before we will put away our phones and read about the dystopia we were warned about many times before and is now upon us. Maybe books can help to stop it happening.

In the meantime, the library—one of our few public and non-commercial spaces—should be a haven where young and old are welcomed, to read and think and consider. Healthy communities need to have not just a GP surgery but a library too.

Competing interests: See [www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors/margaret-mccartney](http://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors/margaret-mccartney).

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