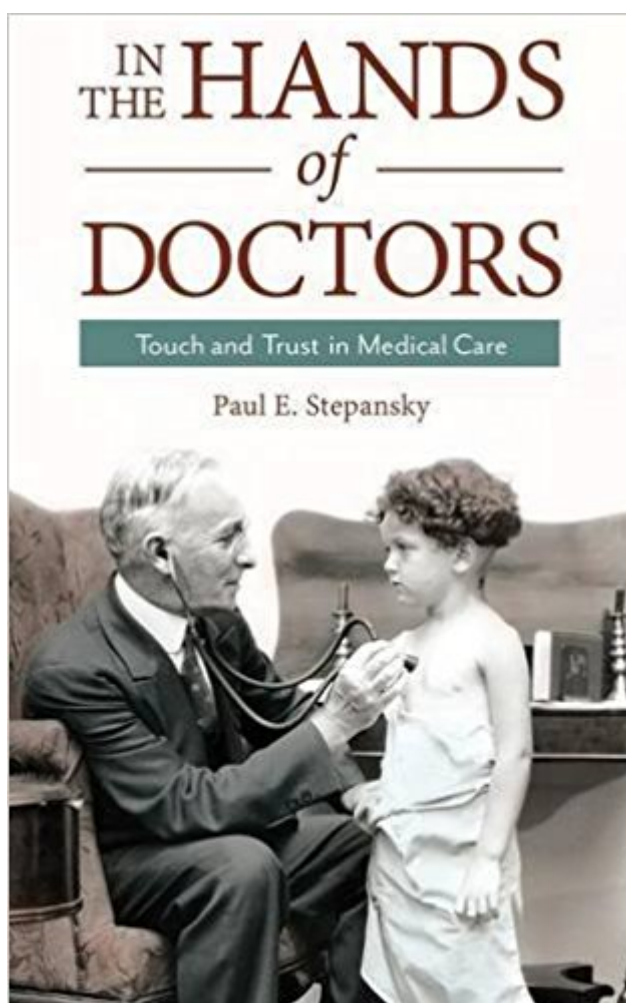


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# In The Hands Of Doctors: Touch And Trust In Medical Care



## Synopsis

Written by a highly respected medical historian, this book examines how and why medical caring— including the role of touch and procedure in caregiving— has evolved in recent decades and how these changes have affected doctor-patient trust as well as patient health and the "health" of the current medical system. Draws on medical history since the early 19th century to demonstrate how the procedural aspects of medicine are foundational to trusting doctor-patient relationships. Examines how the diminished authority of physicians as decision makers and consumerization of medical services have complicated caregiving. Provides concrete proposals for reinvigorating primary care medicine by developing a new primary care specialty and making better use of nurse practitioners and other nonphysician providers

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This book takes many conversations occurring in the world of medicine and reframes them in historical perspective. The result is a body of work with pearls of wisdoms strung between the pages. . . . In the Hands of Doctors is an engaging and relevant read for anyone interested in the nuances of the doctor-patient relationship; a historical framework for understanding today's questions in the medical humanities; or thoughtful narrative on cultivating humanity in the modern practice of medicine." - The Arnold P. Gold Foundation

"An engaging, richly documented, brilliant critique of the bond between doctor and patient, ranging

from classical times through the present. The need for the bond continues, Stepansky argues; patients trust doctors, not teams, medical homes, or health care systems. Along the way he discusses what it means to 'care' for someone as a professional, whether empathy can be taught, the narrowed scope of family medicine as a field, and how far science and the procedural aspects of medicine are antagonistic to, or simply part of, the humanity inherent in medicine. He offers his own ideas for change. This is a superb introduction to the role of the doctor in a continuing historical context." (Rosemary Stevens, PhD, DeWitt Wallace Distinguished Scholar, Weill Cornell Medical College, and author, *A Time of Scandal: Charles R. Forbes, Warren G. Harding and the Making of the Veterans Bureau*) "Paul Stepansky's *In the Hands of Doctors* is a unique and compelling reexamination of American medical practice and patient expectations in historical and cultural context. Examining the many ways in which we seek health, literally from the doctor's touch, Stepansky draws on his skills as a respected cultural historian and his perspective growing up the son of a rural general practitioner in the 1950s and 1960s. The result is a multilayered, nuanced, and accessible study that focuses on what physicians have offered and patients have sought, especially since the Second World War. Stepansky laments the impact of specialization on what he terms 'true doctoring,' even while recognizing its great benefit in treating illness. Eschewing nostalgia while acknowledging the complexity of today's health care delivery, Stepansky nevertheless offers a way back to the type of care his father provided. This book deserves a wide audience not only of health practitioners and patients, but also of medical historians and medical humanities scholars." (Howard I. Kushner, PhD, Nat C. Robertson Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University) "In the Hands of Doctors is an original contribution to medical history and, in addition, a book that will appeal to all those in the caring professions: psychotherapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurse practitioners, and others. Dr. Stepansky gives new meaning to the roles of touch, empathy, and friendship as these are involved in medical practice, and he presents original ideas about the shape of such practice as it moves into the next decades. In short, a clearly written and profoundly argued book." (Louis Breger, PhD, Professor of Psychoanalytic Studies, Emeritus, California Institute of Technology) "One of the greatest challenges confronting 21st-century medical education is how to train physicians who are not only competent but also compassionate, and who know how to demonstrate that caring to the patient. In this engaging and deeply personal book, Paul Stepansky gives us a valuable historical perspective on caring in medicine and offers suggestions that will be useful for medical educators, practicing physicians, nurse practitioners, and patients alike." (Joel D. Howell M.D., PhD, Victor Vaughan Professor of the History of Medicine, University of Michigan)

In *The Hands of Doctors* is a most illuminating book. As a general internist who practiced primary care medicine for over 33 years, I found it fascinating to gain a historical perspective on the nature of caring and touch in medicine. Each chapter is rich with information that provides new insights into the doctor-patient relationship. Dr. Stepansky's keen observations provided me with a better understanding of the nature of the bonds that I so often felt with my own patients. More importantly, his elaboration on the therapeutic nature of those bonds gave me a broadened appreciation for their importance. As the author so aptly puts forth, patients may receive excellent care, but not necessarily feel well cared for. This is a most important point that gets to the heart of why so many people today are disillusioned with their health care. Dr. Stepansky also spends some time making suggestions on how to reshape, and thus reinvigorate primary care medicine. He does so drawing on his vast knowledge of the history of medicine. His ideas are most thought-provoking and compelling. The book is beautifully written and was, indeed, a pleasure to read. It should be required reading for all medical students, nursing students, and indeed most anyone preparing to enter the healing arts. Dr. Stepansky points out that understanding the classics and history used to be a required part of the education of all physicians. Perhaps a book such as this could be the foundation of such education once again.

Where does the artistry of medicine really lie, and how can we cultivate it in today's doctors? These seem to be the central questions of Paul E. Stepansky's book, *In the Hands of Doctors: Touch and Trust in Medical Care*. Dr. Stepansky employs the lens of a medical historian to examine the art of medical caring. The author traces historical truth as it relates to modern quandaries and uses that data, as well as personal narrative (his father, William Stepansky MD, was a family physician who practiced in rural Pennsylvania) to project a vision for the future. This book takes many conversations occurring in the world of medicine and reframes them in historical perspective. The result is a body of work with pearls of wisdoms strung between the pages. The passage below is representative of this unique approach:

“Critiques of depersonalized contemporary medicine from all sides and directions have long trained their sights on a common target: technology. By considering how physicians and patients reacted to the ‘high technology’ of the past, we can understand that debates about the usefulness and desirability of medical technology are as old as medicine itself. EKG machines, X-ray machines, blood pressure meters (sphygmomanometers), hypodermic syringes, even the humble stethoscope—all were once high technologies that elicited

deep ambivalence among physicians and anxiety and displeasure among the patients subjected to them. What were once newfangled instruments of questionable value have become aspects of personalized, technology-free doctoring. Over a span of years, they ceased to be alienating tools interposed between doctor and patient and became tools of a different kind, perhaps not tools at all but simple extenders of the physician's person. (pages 12 and 13)

The boldest parts of this book lie in Stepansky's projections and recommendations for the future. As a scholar of the history of family practice and primary care in America, he makes thoughtful arguments for the greater integration of physician assistants and nurse practitioners into primary care, as well as refocusing the methods of family physicians to a more hands on, procedural specialty. Stepansky makes compelling arguments for the necessity of teaching empathy to medical students in a manner that is genuine, and not commodified. He addresses the question of friendship between doctor and patient, an interesting foray into a nuanced relationship. He also discusses burnout, offering a paradigm for understanding its origins and offering solutions to the problem of caregiver fatigue, with an emphasis on touch. *In the Hands of Doctors* is an engaging and relevant read for anyone interested in the nuances of the doctor-patient relationship; a historical framework for understanding today's questions in the medical humanities; or thoughtful narrative on cultivating humanity in the modern practice of medicine. (This review was originally published at the Arnold P. Gold Foundation Research Institute blog.)

I really liked this book. *In the Hands of Doctors* is a very readable work that provides a fascinating historical context for what we know today as modern medicine. I am not a doctor or a historian. But I enjoy reading interesting anecdotes and historical facts that help me understand why things are the way they are today. This is not a text book, but rather an amazingly researched story about how the doctors we know today came to be, and in particular the post-World War II origins of much of today's medical technology. I read a chapter a day of *In the Hands of Doctors* and each time I put down the book I felt enriched with a more nuanced understanding of doctor behavior today and the offices and hospitals in which they work. While this book reaches further back than WWII to document and explain the evolution of doctoring, it left me in awe of the medical and medical-sociological changes that have occurred just in my own lifetime. The older we get, the more time we spend with our doctors and medical institutions. *In the Hands of Doctors* left me more appreciative of where medicine is today and a bit more tolerant of the aspects of modern medicine that are highly imperfect. It made me think about the relationship I have with my own primary

physician. This is an important book. I suggest reading it.

This book caught me by surprise -- it's a gem that I might have missed. Its treatment of the patient-doctor relationship in contemporary medicine is a feast of historical perspective and critical analysis. It examines in historical context how and why doctors succeed, and fail, to relate to patients as human beings experiencing profound vulnerability, and the centrality of caring in this sense in the entire enterprise of medicine. Anyone working in medicine or who has been a patient will gain a wealth of new understanding. Policy makers and social scientists interested in medicine should also read this book. Its recommendations are thought-provoking and well-informed. And I should add, it is so very well written.

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