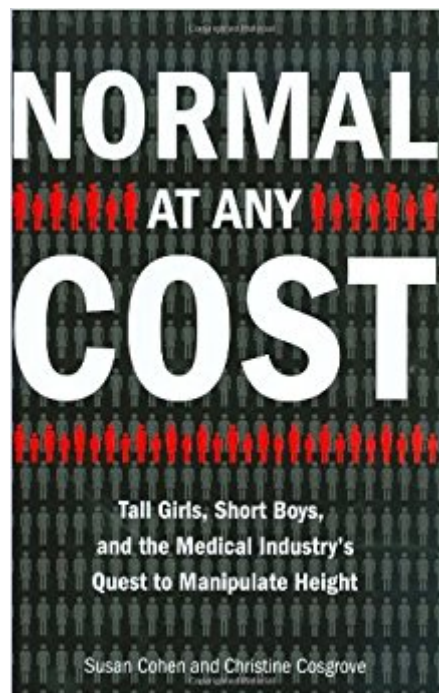




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# Normal At Any Cost: Tall Girls, Short Boys, And The Medical Industry's Quest To Manipulate Height



## Synopsis

Winner National Association of Science Writers "Science in Society Award" for best book.

A fascinating story of medical experimentation, parental love, and the extreme measures taken to make children fit within the norm. Most people rarely think about their height beyond a little wishing and hoping. But for the parents of children who are ridiculed by their peers for being extraordinarily tall or extraordinarily short, height can cause great anguish. For decades, the medical establishment has responded to these worries by prescribing controversial treatments and therapies for children who fall outside of the "normal" height range. While some have benefited, many have suffered from devastating side effects. In this riveting book, Susan Cohen and Christine Cosgrove provide a voice for the parents, doctors, scientists, and pharmaceutical companies involved in these experimental treatments. They also tell the story of the boys and girls themselves, many of them now grown, who were subjected to a wide range of non-FDA-approved medical procedures. These treatments, which consisted of extreme doses of estrogen, pituitary glands taken from both animals and human cadavers, and testosterone injections, often had disastrous side effects. Who is to say how tall is too tall, and how short is too short? For many of the individuals represented in this book, the answers have been clear, and they are grateful to the medical industry for improving upon nature. For others, left in the wake of this same science, the answers are fueled by tragic regret. The authors explore the dueling motives behind these procedures: with parents desperate to help their children "fit in" and doctors and scientists hungry for scientific breakthroughs. Combining extensive research and in-depth interviews, *Normal at Any Cost* is the first book to place a human face on this complex and ethically charged medical history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Science journalist Cohen and Cosgrove, a WebMD contributor, offer an emotionally charged indictment of the medical-pharmaceutical complex centered on efforts to control height (making boys taller, girls shorter) in otherwise normal, healthy children. Reviewing five decades of such efforts, such as in the 1950s with the administration of estrogen to stunt tall girls' growth, the authors take to task pediatric endocrinologists, drug companies and the parents who bring their children for treatment. This history is meant as a cautionary tale, and Cohen and Cosgrove raise all the right questions: when do we cross the line from treating disease to satisfying desires for perfection? can the exorbitant cost of growth hormone therapy be justified in an otherwise inadequate health system? do drug companies distort the practice of medicine? does government adequately protect the public? Because it can take decades for the ill effects of treatment to emerge, this account can only raise questions about possible threats from current practices. Fortunately, the treatments much of the book is devoted to are no longer in use. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Cohen and Cosgrove pull no punches. Medical intervention into height adjustment is nothing more than a futures gamble. Physicians, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and others who should know freely admit there is no way, except in rare instances, of predicting with any degree of certainty how tall or short a child will be at full maturity. So why, then, the mad scramble by some parents to intervene, hoping that medicating their children will assure gender-appropriate stature? That's another thing the coauthors make clear. There is a great deal of money to be made playing on the fears of moms and dads of too-tall girls and too-short boys by recent estimates, about \$50,000 per inch, without guaranteed success. Furthermore, there has been no scientific study of the long-term effects of the treatments. Some delay puberty. Some speed it up. Some may have no desired effect whatsoever. Eye-opening reading for anyone considering these interventions. --Donna Chavez

At age 10 I was put on DES. I was projected to be between 6'4" and 6'6". My brother is 6'7". I am 5'10" now. I was thrilled when I found this book - I hoped it would go into detail about some of the uncommon physical issues I have. While the book talks about The Tall Girls organization and the

fact that they compiled a list of the long term effects of DES treatment, the book, sadly, does not reveal the list. Now that The Tall Girls has disbanded, I don't know where to turn for more information. That said, the book does an excellent job of identifying what was done to me and so many others. Something that, at least in my experience, few doctors have knowledge of. This is a must read for those treated, those wishing they had been treated and those considering treatment today. More generally, it is a cautionary tale that should be mandatory reading in medical schools!

Needed the book for class and it was both cheap and came in a couple weeks. Can't really ask for a better deal. Not quite a pleasure read but definitely interesting with good commentary on the development of pediatric endocrinology and the emerging use of specific hormones in the medical field.

This is a wonderful book. It's well-researched and documented. (Index! Foot notes!) It covers a little known area of medicine which shines a klieg light on the way the medical-industrial-marketing complex operates and the way government grants wishes to big business. Shame on the docs, labs, drug companies and FDA review committees all complicit in foisting dangerous treatments on children for decades. The book is beautifully written and surprisingly compelling. I stayed up all night reading it. Thank you Susan Cohen and Christine Cosgrove. I want my book group to read Normal At Any Cost.

This well written compilation of the issues surrounding "tall" girls has all the detail about medical evaluation and hormonal manipulation that was in vogue in the recent past. It exposes some of the prejudices harbored about tall woman and has fascinating history about some of the finest medical institutions and doctors and their patients.

Normal at any Cost is a cautionary tale of doctors' attempts to control children's height through medical intervention. For more than half a century, in order to curtail growth in tall girls and to enhance growth in short boys, doctors have resorted to unorthodox, unproven, poorly understood hormone treatments. Doctors' decisions to administer treatments were not the result of sound medical practice, but the result of pressure from parents and drug companies, or doctors' own personal reasons. Initially, doctors only treated children whose hormone levels were out of normal range, yet eventually they began treating children who were healthy and developing within the norm, but whose parents wanted height adjustments for social / cultural reasons. In the Introduction, the

authors note that they are not trying to "discourage a parent from taking a poorly growing son or daughter to be examined by a doctor. Growth is the primary indicator of health in a child...[but] medicine can [quickly] move from curing disease, to treating disability, to leveling disadvantage, to satisfying desires for perfection" (p. ix). Through the stories of the children, who are now adults, readers learn of the lasting physical, psychological, and emotional impact of this medical application on their lives. *Normal at any Cost* is an eye-opening, thought-provoking book that provides a revealing look at the issue of height control. Meanwhile, it encourages deep consideration of the ethical issues involved. These issues are numerous and far-reaching and will become more important as medical science finds other means of manipulating our genes. Interesting and easy to follow, this book reads like a novel: One can only wish that it were.

This is an outstanding book which compels us to think about the appropriateness and unintended consequences of medical solutions. The thoroughness with which the authors researched the subject is impressive, and the ease with which the reader is drawn into medically sophisticated issues is a tribute to their abilities to translate terms and procedures into readily understandable concepts. The authors interweave reporting with the stories of those who were treated, about whom the reader soon cares profoundly; I was sufficiently riveted that I sometimes skipped ahead to learn how these lives progressed. The book raises important bioethical issues without being dogmatic, and presents impartial retrospective and current views on the decisions that were made. I took a day off work to finish the book, and strongly recommend it.

Every day we read another news story about how medicine or "big pharma" (the pharmaceutical companies) have influenced our lives or politics without us knowing and often without our best interests at heart. This book exposes how that influence plays to our vulnerabilities: All parents want the best for their children, and this book explains how dangerous hormone therapies were used to manipulate height in girls and boys for decades beginning in the 1950s, all in the interest of achieving the "ideal" height for both. This book is a well-researched and well-written "must read" for anyone with an interest in public health and science. It provides a glimpse of how power, money, and the human desire to manipulate our destiny may impact future medical treatments.

If you're still wondering how health care became so expensive, read this book. In this meticulously reported and gracefully written exploration of a nation's obsession with height, Susan Cohen and Christine Cosgrove show how fame and fortune became more important for researchers and

doctors than the health and happiness of their patients. This is an illuminating look at the cost to society and trauma to the children when the medical community begins to classify even healthy girls and boys as victims of disease because they don't fit some constantly shifting perception of "normal." Billions of dollars have been spent and some patients have paid with their lives.

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