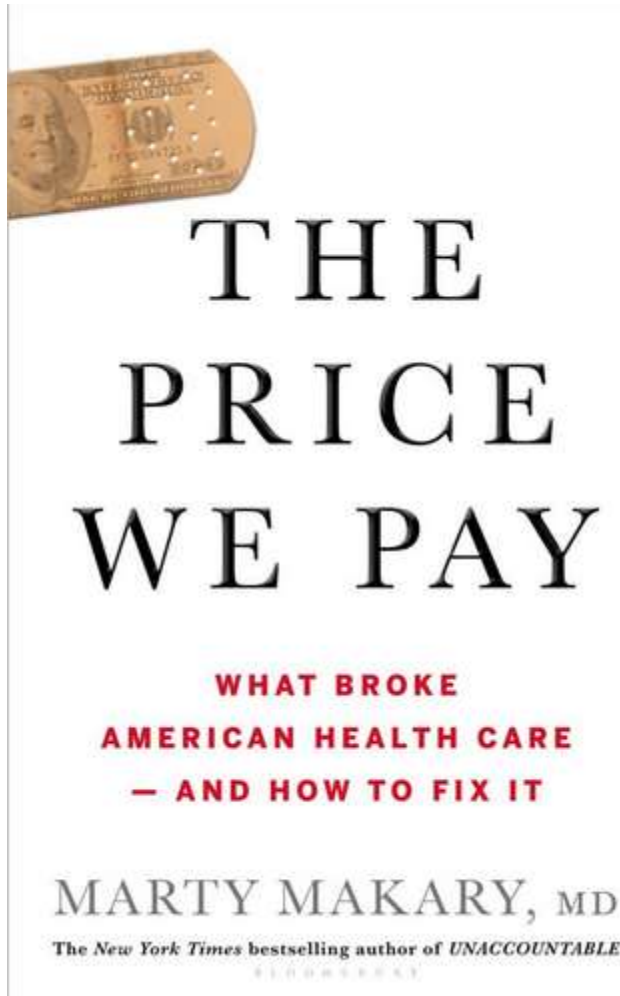


Makary offers prescription to fix failing health system

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“The Price We Pay: What Broke American Health Care – and How to Fix It” by Marty Makary. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, 267 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“For centuries, medicine was based on an intimate relationship between doctors and patients,” Marty Makary explains near the beginning of “The Price We Pay: What Broke American Health Care – and How to Fix It,” his groundbreaking new treatise on why the cost of going to the doctor in the United States is spiraling out of control at an accelerating pace. “But behind the scenes, a gigantic industry emerged, buying, selling and trading our medical services. Health care industry stakeholders are playing a game, marking up the price of medical care, then secretly discounting it, depending on who’s paying.”

“The operations I do today use the same equipment, anesthetics, sutures and paid staff that I used 10 years ago,” he continues a little later. “So how is it that health insurance costs have been skyrocketing? It’s explained by the money games of medicine, loaded with middlemen, kickbacks and hidden costs. The profits are big, but the casualties are great.”

Admittedly, I have been interested in this topic for quite some time. Mom died from colon cancer in 2009 after a two-year battle with that insidious disease; Dad passed away in 2015

after a 19-year struggle with prostate cancer. I accompanied them on office visits and various hospital stays throughout both their ordeals. I also saw the bills that arrived on a consistent basis. Had they not been on Medicare, there is no way either of them – or the extended family for several generations – would have been able to pay for the extensive treatment both received before succumbing to the inevitable.

Given that context, I found “The Price We Pay” to be remarkably enlightening on a number of levels as well as exceptionally infuriating on others. Makary’s exhaustive exploration of the current condition of our health care system is obviously informed by his long and distinguished career as a physician, but the insights that struck me as most profound came from the listening tour he embarked upon as a preliminary step to lay the foundation for what he eventually was able to write. Witness the following from “Two Americas,” the fourth chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“As I traveled across America for this book, what I saw was not a Republican/Democrat divide or a conservative/liberal divide. Instead, I felt a widespread sentiment among low- and middle-income workers that the system was stacked against them, controlled by the powerful elite who make the rules. Honest, hardworking Americans feel helpless against a ruling class who use power and access

to their favor, creating fine print and laws to give themselves the upper hand. The folks I met often pointed out how the process of appealing a hospital bill or an insurance company denial was too complex and utterly exhausting.”

Structurally, “The Price We Pay” consists of 18 chapters arranged in three major sections: “Gold Rush,” which is made up of the first five chapters, “Improving Wisely,” which consists of the next five chapters, and “Redesigning Health Care,” which is comprised of the final eight chapters. As might be expected given the subject matter, the book is moderately researched, with 11 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main text.

A member of the National Academy of Medicine, Makary is a surgeon and professor of health policy and management at Johns Hopkins. He is also the founder of Restoring Medicine, which works to provide assistance for people who are having difficulty managing their medical expenses. Moreover, he is executive director of Improving Wisely, a national physician collaboration focused on reducing unnecessary medical care and lowering health care costs. The author of more than 250 scientific articles, he has also written for the Wall Street Journal and USA Today. His previous books include “Unaccountable: What Hospitals Won’t Tell You and How Transparency Can Revolutionize Health Care” and “Mama Maggie: The Untold Story of One Woman’s Mission to Love the Forgotten Children of Egypt’s Garbage Slums.”

One of the more fascinating revelations in “The Price We Pay” revolves around the adversarial posture many physicians apparently assume toward one another within the context of their respective medical practices. This seems to be especially pervasive among doctors associated with the same hospital or medical center. I have encountered this on occasion in my own experience, but I never knew it was as widespread or detrimental to the profession – at least according to Makary.

“I’ve traveled to hundreds of U.S. hospitals and met with countless doctors,” Makary notes in “The Words We Use,” the next to last chapter. “I’m always amazed by the maverick phenomenon, even within small groups of physicians. Let’s say there’s a group of three physicians. Often, one will criticize the others for not practicing up-to-date medicine; another will feel that she deserves to take fewer calls; and the third finds a creative way to hoard the good cases.

“Don’t get me wrong, many doctors get along as swimmingly as my partners and I do in my surgical faculty group,” he adds. “We are personal friends, we don’t keep score, and we help with one another’s patients. But many groups wrestle with dynamics that can put internal politics above the needs of patients.”

To be sure, I found many sections of “The Price We Pay” to be somewhat disheartening – and even enraging. As Makary makes abundantly clear, however, it is forces beyond the control of the doctors and their patients that are most responsible. Sure, physicians share some of the blame for the sorry shape of our health care system, but they are relatively minor players in a market-driven behemoth that, in many cases, no longer has what’s best for the individual patient at the core of its operating philosophy. In a very real sense, the book is a call to arms to restore our health care institutions to what they were originally designed to be (and were for much of their history).

Throughout most of the book, I found myself becoming progressively more depressed as I delved deeper and deeper into Makary’s narrative. The portrait he meticulously constructs is not flattering. Given this architecture, I was pleasantly surprised by the remarkably cogent game plan for rectifying the situation he presents in “What We Can Do,” the final chapter.

We are indeed in dire straits, but it is not hopeless. And I think you will agree if you decide to add this one to your reading list. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.