

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

The Secret Language of Doctors: Cracking the Code of Hospital Slang. By Brian Goldman, Toronto, ON: Harper Collins, 2014. Hardcover: 368 p. ISBN: 978-1-44341-601-6. Price: CDN\$29.99. Available from: <http://www.harpercollins.ca/books/Secret-Language-Doctors-Dr-Brian-Goldman/?isbn=9781443416016>.

From the moment we learn to talk we are always communicating, whether it is the babbling and first words of babies to children playing make-believe and uttering strange expressions amongst each other that only they can understand. As adults, we are required to master the vernacular of our chosen careers, perhaps even priding ourselves that we can speak freely in terms that someone outside our peer group would be hard-pressed to follow. In the medical field, acronyms and shorthand are particularly bountiful; as health librarians and information specialists, we may scratch our heads at times in attempting to interpret a request, wishing we had some form of decoder at our disposal. In *The Secret Language of Doctors*, Dr. Brian Goldman, an emergency physician at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto and the host of *White Coat, Black Art* on CBC radio, introduces the vast jargon used among doctors on a daily basis when discussing their patients. This time around though, the reader (and quite possibly the patient) is not left in the dark trying to make sense of what he or she overheard his or her doctor talking about. Goldman provides the cipher to break the slang code.

Having listened to several of Dr. Goldman's radio broadcasts, and hearing him speak live for the first time in 2013, I was amazed at his ability to diffuse a particularly sensitive situation with his wit and down-to-earth-approach. His personality certainly shines though in this monograph. Organized into 15 eye-catching tongue-in-cheek-titled chapters, each broken down into numerous sub-sections as if a few moments were taken to jot down a few notes before continuing, *The Secret Language of Doctors* presents a bird's eye view of real-life encounters in hospitals and emergency departments across North America, focusing on the slang that physicians use to emote their frustrations behind their patients' backs.

Focusing on interviews with "hundreds of attending physicians, residents, nurses, paramedics and students" (p. 21), Goldman reconstructs the epidemiology of medical slang, charting a lingo that he attributes to the "slangmeister" (p. 23) of modern medical slang, Dr. Stephen Bergman. Writing under the pen name Samuel Shem, Bergman's 1978 novel, *The House of God*, seems to function as a sort of measuring stick against which the wide variety of terms Goldman has encountered over more than 30 years are judged. When recounting his interviews, Goldman allows each medical professional to speak in

their own words, a tactic that transports the reader to the set of a broadcast studio: Goldman and his interviewee are engaged in a back-and-forth dialogue, with the reader listening in. In addition, each chapter is extensively researched with numerous references to articles, books, and even television shows and films on the subject of slang in the medical realm. As Goldman includes neither an index nor a bibliography in his book (an unfortunate oversight), all of the subsections within each chapter can be a bit overwhelming at times, necessitating the reintroduction of several key healthcare professionals that were interviewed, which is rather repetitive. Nevertheless, after taking note of each citation the reader, if so inclined, could conceivably produce a systematic review of healthcare argot for posterity.

Goldman is adamant that his book is not merely a glossary of terms that doctors use to communicate with each other. In his own explanation of why he chose to write about the subject, he wishes to see his work as a portrayal of the culture of modern medicine (p. 21). Although his book is subtitled *Cracking the Code of Hospital Slang*, Goldman states that argot is a more accurate term for what he hopes to accomplish. Although the current definition of the term refers to the vocabulary of a particular group (p. 6), Goldman traces argot back 150 years to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, where argot is depicted as "the language of misery...[a description that] fits with the experience of residents and sometimes of other medical staff working in hospitals" (p. 6).

In today's politically correct society, the line between freedom of speech and being reprimanded for speaking one's mind seems to be a fine one. Although some of the stereotypes expressed are humorous and light-hearted, others are certainly offensive. Despite providing his own views and context for each slang phrase that he introduces, Goldman himself acknowledges that there are some words he would never utter out loud, even to his closest colleagues. Further, he shares cases where physicians have been disciplined or have even lost their jobs for speaking their mind and being overheard by patients or medical administrators, as he eloquently describes in Chapter 15, *Slang Police*. Nevertheless, Goldman defends his position to write in such a matter-of-fact style, believing in open channels of communication and accurately portraying the frustrations felt by many medical professionals in today's society, particularly when dealing with patients they perceive as being difficult. Having worked an average 70–80 hours per week and with some residents working upwards of 100 hours per week (p. 7), Goldman explains this dialogue as a form of release; however, he disagrees with some of the medical slang that doctors come up with.

Without apologizing for writing *The Secret Language of Doctors* in such a frank manner, Goldman recognizes that his book will not be met favourably by all, despite his

position that he is merely trying to “unpack and explain the culture from which the slang comes” (p. 344). By providing the public a key into a linguistic society that once only admitted physicians, Goldman leaves it to each and every reader “to decide if *The Secret Language of Doctors* should remain in the shadows” (p. 344). Anyone working with physicians including library staff and health-care professionals should include this book on their shelves, as it opens a window into a vernacular that might

have otherwise remained closed. This book is therefore highly recommended.

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