

“Snowball in a Blizzard: A Physician's Notes on Uncertainty in Medicine”

Steven Hatch, 2016, 293 pages, Basic Books, \$27.99

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

“Snowball in a Blizzard: A Physician's Notes on Uncertainty in Medicine” is a cautionary tale — actually several of them — about why progress in medical science is like a Spring walk on a sunny day — across a pond covered with shifting patches of thin ice.

The book persuasively explains what even the experts just don't know or can't possibly know, to say nothing of regular physicians, the media, or your next-door neighbor. The human body with its myriad frailties are too, well, unknowable, to behave as it *should*. This is not to say that medical science is a giant collective delusion — like certain alternative practices that need not be named here — only that a specific patient with a specific condition on a specific day should not bet the ranch that a specific treatment will certainly work. The odds may be with us, but it's still a crapshoot.

Since controlled, double-blinded clinical research is the gold standard for testing medical theories, the burden is on us to ensure those patches of thin ice are thick enough to get patients across the pond. Nevertheless, clinical research is fallible, to say the least, so let's keep in mind that humility is the word of the day.

The book includes nine chapters:

- *Primum Non Nocere*: The Motivations and Hazards of Overdiagnosis
- Vignette: The Perils of Predictive Value
- Snowball in a Blizzard
- The Pressures of Managing Pressure
- Lyme's False Prophets: Chronic Fatigue, Tick-Borne Illness, and the Overselling of Certainty
- The Origins of Knowledge and the Seeds of Uncertainty
- The Correlation/Causation Problem, or Why Dark Chocolate May Not Lower Your Risk of Heart Failure
- “Health Watch”: Hype, Hysteria, and the Media's Overconfident March of Progress
- Conclusion: The Conversation

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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