



## *Healing the healer*

### ONE CURIOUS DOCTOR

A Memoir of Medicine, Migration and Mortality

by Hilton Koppe

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WHILE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a narrative about the author, often spanning their life until the time of writing, a memoir is reflective writing that seeks to make sense of aspects of their life. A memoir contains facts and information but, more significantly, it dwells on the emotions and feelings of the author. Sometimes a memoir pivots around a single incident, while others cover several important events and weave these into a cohesive story.

*One Curious Doctor* by Hilton Koppe falls into the latter category.

In summary, Koppe was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after spending more than four decades as a rural GP and was strongly advised to give up his general practice. He wrote this book in part to reflect on what happened in his life in the leadup to that diagnosis.

Koppe chose to section the book in the format of a traditional medical record: *History of Present Illness; Past Medical History; Social History; Family History; Examination; Diagnosis; and Treatment Plan*. Each section is populated with anecdotes, both professional and personal, that relate to that focus. To fulfil his ethical obligations, he contacted those people who are the subjects of these anecdotes to ensure approval of their stories being told. In cases where people had died and he could find no living relatives, he did not use the real name of the person.

A Memoir of Medicine,  
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# ONE CURIOUS DOCTOR

HILTON KOPPE

*A gift... allow yourself to be enchanted.* ARNOLD ZABLE



It is a testament to his regard for his patients that they freely gave their permission. The depth of these stories suggests that Koppe probably kept a journal of his interactions with patients throughout his career.

To this reader, several themes emerge within Koppe's memoir; themes that are not used as chapter headings, but rather weave in and out of his writing. If one changes the word 'doctor' to 'your chosen profession' they are themes that may resonate with other readers.

### *The son of migrant parents*

AS A YOUNG CHILD, Koppe accompanied his parents when they migrated to Australia from South Africa in search of a life that was beyond the politics of South Africa's apartheid regime. His parents had met in South Africa after both families had independently left their homes in Germany and Lithuania in the lead-up to World War II. His father had dreams of becoming a doctor – dreams that were squashed by the chronic dysentery that came from fighting in trenches in Eastern Europe.

Hilton Koppe took on that medical pathway but, in his view, to fully understand his professional pathway he had to delve into the lives of his family and his forebears in Europe. His family history impacted his journey as a doctor.

At the completion of his training Koppe elected to become a rural GP and accepted a position in the rural town of Bangalow (near Byron Bay) after a serendipitous conversation in an ice-cream shop on the way home to Sydney from the Brisbane Expo. A part of his early learning was that as a young doctor he needed to earn the trust of the locals to successfully minister to them, and this became an important priority. When he gained that trust, he quickly developed a reputation as a doctor who knew his patients and deeply cared about them.

On occasions, he had no choice other than to trial new clinical processes because some people who came to see him had medical conditions for which there was no standard prescribed treatment. This was particularly true for those aged over 75. In these circumstances his knowledge of the patient and his years of experience gave him the confidence to develop a treatment plan not necessarily found in common medical textbooks. It occurred to him that doctors could learn as much from their patients as patients learned from their doctors.

### *Invested in the community*

RURAL COMMUNITIES thrive best when there are organisations or individuals that foster relationships within that community. Sporting groups, Service Clubs, Churches and the like regularly provide that service – sometimes unwittingly as a by-product of their mission. But there are often individuals who also provide substantial support to their fellow citizens, and through them the community is the beneficiary. As an example, a thoughtful and well-meaning GP is a person often entrusted with the hopes, fears and problems of others and consequently adds much to the community. Hilton Koppe became that type of person.

It would seem obvious that a GP is a healer. A doctor is someone who studies symptoms, identifies causes and prescribes remedies for the malady of

each patient who comes before them. However, healing can involve more than developing an action plan targeted at physiological issues. It can also involve developing a thorough understanding of a patient's needs so that the best way of addressing those needs can be enacted. Koppe quickly developed the art of genuinely listening to a patient and being curious about all the things that contributed to their well-being. In fact, he learned that the best therapy involves more than medical interventions and that sometimes healing occurs despite the medical treatment. He became 'one curious doctor'.

Some of the hardest times for an empathetic doctor come when, despite all that has been done, the patient dies. It is inevitable that doctors encounter the deaths of patients, but Koppe makes it clear that familiarity with death does not necessarily make it easier to accept. Empathy is a powerful tool in medicine – and other professions – but as Koppe points out, the empath can bear the consequence of this chosen response. In his case, after more than four decades in the profession, he was diagnosed with PTSD because of the vicarious trauma of the job.

Early on in his career, one of Koppe's patients introduced him to the idea of using poetry-writing as personal therapy. It becomes clear in the book that he had long used reflective writing as his own therapy for dealing with the illnesses and traumas of his patients. He eventually became involved in the training of young medicos and introduced trainee doctors to the art of reflective writing to increase their understanding of the impact their actions had on patients.

### *Doctor as patient*

KOPPE HAD TO MAKE the transition from being a healer to one who needed to be healed. His PTSD diagnosis came as a shock despite experiencing various stress symptoms. In a poem towards the end of the book he writes:

something's gotta change  
I can't keep going like this  
the neck pain  
the rashes

the insomnia  
my body's telling me something  
what'll it take for me to start listening?  
yesterday I was a doctor  
what am I now?  
I will be a patient  
a good patient  
because my job now  
is to get better.

He was initially an *impatient* patient but ultimately understood the need to live a less hectic life and to be more selective about how his time was spent. That meant he had to give up his career as a GP at a younger age than he would have anticipated: the paradox of a healer having to be healed.

All of this makes a fascinating and thought-provoking read.

*One Curious Doctor* appears to have been written partly to document his family history, partly to reflect on a personal journal of healing, partly to inform other medical practitioners and partly to encourage reflection by all readers of the memoir. There is wisdom embedded in its pages, including the wisdom of taking the utmost care in choosing the best words in conversations with traumatised people. Hilton Koppe is honest with himself, his patients and his readers and it is the sensitive honesty that remains a savory after-taste of the book.

Koppe continues to be involved with the education of trainee doctors. The young people in his classes, whether they understand it at the time or not, are the beneficiaries of the lessons he has learned from a life well lived.

A final thought seems to reflect Koppe's view of his life. It comes in a quotation from a book by American physician Rache Remen, titled *My Grandfather's Blessings*:

Perhaps real wisdom lies in not seeking answers at all. Any answer we find will not be true for long. An answer is a place we can fall asleep as life moves past us to its next question. After all these years I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company.

