



AIDS Doctors: Voices from the Epidemic: An Oral History

Ronald Bayer, Gerald M. Oppenheimer

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Today, AIDS has been indelibly etched in our consciousness. Yet it was less than twenty years ago that doctors confronted a sudden avalanche of strange, inexplicable, seemingly untreatable conditions that signaled the arrival of a devastating new disease. Bewildered, unprepared, and pushed to the limit of their diagnostic abilities, a select group of courageous physicians nevertheless persevered. This unique collective memoir tells their story. Based on interviews with nearly eighty doctors whose lives and careers have centered on the AIDS epidemic from the early 1980s to the present, this candid, emotionally textured account details the palpable anxiety in the medical profession as it experienced a rapid succession of cases for which there was no clinical history. The physicians interviewed chronicle the roller coaster experiences of hope and despair, as they applied newly developed, often unsuccessful therapies. Yet these physicians who chose to embrace the challenge confronted more than just the sense of therapeutic helplessness in dealing with a disease they could not conquer. They also faced the tough choices inherent in treating a controversial, sexually and intravenously transmitted illness as many colleagues simply walked away. Many describe being gripped by a sense of mission: by the moral imperative to treat the disempowered and despised. Nearly all describe a common purpose, an esprit de corps that bound them together in a terrible yet exhilarating war against an invisible enemy. This extraordinary oral history forms a landmark effort in the understanding of the AIDS crisis. Carefully collected and eloquently told, the doctors narratives reveal the tenacity and unquenchable optimism that has paved the way for taming a 20th-century plague.

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