

"Taming the Beloved Beast: How Medical Technology Costs are Destroying our Health Care System"

Daniel Callahan, 2009, 267 pages, Princeton University Press, \$29.95

Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

"Taming the Beloved Beast: How Medical Technology Costs are Destroying our Health Care System" is a thoughtful discussion of the challenges facing healthcare in the U.S. The book's name is a bit misleading because, while technology is the primary focus, the book considers a comprehensive range of factors. The bottom line is that society will have to make some extremely hard choices or default to a very bad choice.

Healthcare economists attribute about half the annual increase in healthcare costs to new technologies or to the intensified use of old ones. The book therefore argues that we cannot control healthcare costs without limiting the availability and use of technology, i.e., drugs and devices. The implications for clinical research are profound.

The book argues that society has the responsibility to help young people grow old, but not old people grow ancient. People may want to live forever, but society cannot afford to take on that responsibility. From amongst all the unpalatable options, the book therefore proposes triaging treatment based on age for the benefit of society. Middle-aged people are the core contributors to society, so they should have priority for medical care. Younger people will be the future contributors, so they also should have priority for medical care. However, older people, who have "lived a full life," should have the lowest priority. The book does not suggest sending the elderly out on ice flows but points out that very expensive, heroic measures to prolong the life of an 80 year old for a few months of misery should not be society's top priority. By not investing in that treatment, society can afford to treat someone else or enable the U.S. economy to raise general living standards, which contributes to public health.

Healthcare in the U.S. is based on the principle that every individual deserves the best treatment possible, no matter the circumstances. Implementation of this principle is far from perfect, but it generally applies to those with good insurance coverage. The book's "common good" argument is based on the ethical argument that, since society provides healthcare, society has the right to allocate it for the benefit of society. In other words, individual rights, while important, do not trump society's rights. Society, after all, consists of individuals.

The book supports the use of evidence-based medicine, quality-adjusted life years, and cost/benefit analysis to determine the availability and use of treatments for groups of patients. It takes the position that, if a treatment is inappropriate for most patients with certain characteristics, it should not be used for an individual patient on the rationale that "it can't hurt to try" or "it is immoral to put a price on human life."

The book criticizes new technology for delivering small incremental improvements at a very high cost. However, it does not discuss the cumulative effect of many small improvements over time.

The book consists of nine chapters:

- Introduction
- Medicare on the Ropes
- Taming the Beloved Beast: Medical Technology

- Getting Serious about Costs and Technology
- Competition: The Fix That Will Fail
- The Cohabitation of Medicine and Commerce
- "Medical Necessity": An All-But-Useless Concept
- Redefining "Medical Necessity": From Individual Good to Common Good
- Getting Out from Under: The Politics of Pain

The book is available in bookstores.

Reviewer

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