

BOOK REVIEW



This Is How It Is: True Stories from South Africa

Published by Life Righting Collective.
Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018.
ISBN: 978-1-928232-56-8

Doctors know that many patients struggle with difficult life issues, in their own lives

and in those close to them. If we are honest, we would admit that we also struggle with life's challenges – depression, anxiety, alcoholism, addiction, coming to terms with sexuality and sexual orientation, infidelity, coping with death and grieving, to name a few.

This Is How It Is is a compilation of stories and poems about the real stuff of life. Some of the pieces are written by doctors (yes, me included) and nurses, and deal with themes from their own personal and work experiences.

At book launches of this anthology, people have spontaneously spoken of the transforming value of writing about life experiences. I have personally experienced that 'taking the pain to the page' has helped me process difficulties in my life. It is a way to make sense of them and to discover the underlying meaning. However, writing goes beyond the individual value for the writer, but includes the value in reading what another person who has struggled with a similar issue, and who may have a different perspective, has written.

Empathy is notoriously difficult to teach to medical students. Reading about someone's experience of what it feels like to have depression, or cope with the death of a child, could give a cynical or

arrogant student a deeper awareness of the complexities of human nature or suffering than a psychiatry or palliative care lecture. How do you teach students what it feels like to have an HIV test or why people postpone a lymph node biopsy, and how it feels to wait for the result? Why does a young woman become a sex worker?

Medical humanities are increasingly acknowledged as part of medical education in developed countries. We cannot talk glibly about the 'art' of medicine without drawing inspiration and wisdom from 'the arts', which includes all of the humanities – art, literature, music, social science, history and philosophy. This anthology of eclectic life experiences is a valuable addition to the fledgling medical humanities movement in South Africa, and is worth adding to your home and work library.

This Is How It Is was published by Fanele (Jacana Media) in 2018 and is available at Exclusive Books. It is a product of the Life Righting Collective. To find out more about this non-profit organisation, and to read true stories online, check out <https://www.liferighting.com>

Janet Giddy

Keth'Impilo, Cape Town, South Africa
janetgiddy@gmail.com