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**BOOKMONGER**

## Two looks at medicine in America

By **BARBARA LLOYD  
MCMICHAEL**

Let's consider American health care this week.

In one of the most evocatively titled books you'll ever come across, "Bleed, Blister, Puke, and Purge" focuses on the shockingly inadequate "cures" undertaken by the earliest European immigrants to North America as they tried to deal with everything from broken bones to mental illness.

Author J. Marin Younker is a Lake Forest Park (WA) writer. Her writing style reflects the decade-plus she spent working as a librarian in

teen collections. The short, punchy segments in this book expose questionable medical practices beginning in early colonial times and extending sometimes for centuries.

While the wisdom shared by Native American healers was of some help in dealing with maladies endemic to North America, it was futile in combating Old World scourges like smallpox and measles.

In the early United States, common medical practice might involve superstition, amputation, patent medicine or Mesmerism.

Even our greatest historical figures couldn't

escape the quackery – when George Washington complained of a sore throat, his physicians applied dried beetles to his neck and drained 80 percent of his blood from his body. He did not survive the cure.

Younker suggests that the American public's demand for better medicine didn't really come about until the protracted death of another American President, James Garfield. Shot by an assassin, Garfield languished for more than two months before dying. Hind-sight reveals that it was the thoroughly inept medical attention he received following the shooting that likely killed him.

Following this litany of medical malpractice, Younker concludes with a brief overview of how science, medicine, and technology have coalesced to produce great gains in medical practice over the last century. But don't relax just yet – her final paragraph cites a 2016 study showing that approximately 250,000 patients in the United States

**Bleed, Blister, Puke,  
and Purge –  
J. Marin Younker  
Zest Books –  
112 pp - \$13.99**

**On the Ragged Edge  
of Medicine –  
Patricia Kullberg  
Oregon State  
University Press –  
176 pp - \$18.95**

die every year due to errors in their medical treatment.

"Bleed, Blister, Puke, and Purge" is not a reassuring book, but it is certainly an engrossing one.

"On the Ragged Edge of Medicine" offers another medical perspective. This is a memoir about delivering health services to Portland's most destitute populations.

Dr. Patricia Kullberg served as medical director of the Multnomah County Health Department for over two decades, and also worked as a primary care doctor.

In this collection of

essays, she reflects on the daily interactions she had with patients whose health was compromised by poor choices, mental illness, poverty, or some combination thereof. She talks about policies, red tape, rule-breaking and failure, and cops to occasionally having resorted to patient control when she ran out of options for patient care.

Even if physical healing didn't happen as often as she wanted it to, she realized that sometimes the human connection she offered her patients was just as vital.

"On the Ragged Edge of Medicine" demonstrates that – especially for some populations – modern medicine still has significant limits. This gritty and luminous book is totally worth your attention.

*The Bookmonger is  
Barbara Lloyd McMichael,  
who writes this weekly column  
focusing on the books, authors  
and publishers of the Pacific  
Northwest. Contact her at  
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