

DANGER TO SELF: ON THE FRONT LINE WITH AN ER PSYCHIATRIST

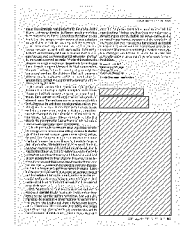
By Paul R. Linde
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IN *DANGER TO SELF*, PSYCHIATRIST PAUL LINDE TAKES READERS to places few have been. In a book that may humor, shock, or enlighten, readers are taken into the jails and emergency departments that deal with the interface between the institutions of society and citizens in emotional crises or on the slippery slope of mental illness or those playing the role of being of danger to themselves for personal gain. Few psychiatrists are exposed to the near-constant stress of emergency psychiatry. Far fewer still choose these unique theaters for their clinical practice, as Linde did because it suited his temperament. Thankfully, some physicians thrive on that life.

“Theatre” may be the best word to frame what one would see during the day-in and day-out interactions of patients and caregivers and the supporting cast of police, administrators, family, and support staff. It is a unique world in which psychiatrists are placed in the roles of healer, judge, or clown, depending on one’s point of view and the moment. It is a difficult world in which to work and at times a difficult world to write about. It is a tall order to describe one’s personal history within any world in which grim humor is so often needed to deal with human tragedy often made more difficult by the rigid strictures of society and the prejudices of one’s own fears. It is difficult to tell any story qualified in one’s mind by “There but for the grace of god go I” while wondering in each paragraph if, for example, a suicidal patient will appear—yet another tragedy dropped off by police or transferred by the “real” emergency department, where “real” physicians save and lose lives and sometimes may even diminish the need for psychiatry until they become paralyzed personally or professionally.

Every psychiatrist knows how serious a referred patient’s situation is, based on how long it takes to talk to the referring physician; when it takes only moments to discuss the patient, rather than hours or days—that is the measure of seriousness. Every psychiatrist knows that sometimes a decision must be made that balances self-determination and paternalism—for example, the right of a person with mental illness to live at home or on the streets—and that sometimes lives hang in the balance. Within the text, Linde quotes teachers, friends, mentors, and notable clinicians to enlighten and explain this difficult weaving of law and humanity.

The story of Linde’s professional and personal choices and of why and how he came to his training also includes



the struggles to balance the competing elements of humor, stress, the laws that guide psychiatrists, and the individuals who may be helped or not by their actions. It is not possible to fully discuss within vignettes the nuances of forensic and emergency psychiatry and the diagnostic elements that lead to treatment options without some degree of technical explanation. It is at those points that *Danger to Self* falters.

It is difficult to weave humor and tragedy while quoting diagnostic axes and long-past teachers. At about 250 pages including end notes, *Danger to Self* is generally successful. At times witty and humorous, it is also enlightening and can help to synthesize the many elements of current cultural dilemmas of psychiatric care. It is not a deep, challenging book and does not pretend to be. It certainly does not describe a profession under siege, as the hyperbole on the dust jacket suggests. This is not a reference or a must-read book; it is simply a good book I enjoyed reading. I will pass it along to colleagues, particularly students interested in psychiatry, and I think they will enjoy it as well.

Mark H. Fleisher, MD
University of Nebraska College of Medicine
Omaha
mhfleish@unmc.edu

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