

Seven Signs of Life - Aoiffe Abbey

Published 2019 by Vintage

Dr Richard Carruthers
GP, Lancaster Medical Practice

Developed from her BMA blog, *The Secret Doctor*, *Seven Signs of Life* is Intensive Care trainee, Aoiffe Abbey's exploration of her hospital work through seven emotions: Fear, Grief, Joy, Distraction, Anger, Disgust and Hope. These are, of course, all emotions we expect to encounter over our lifetime. But what if we encountered all seven every day? So says the book's blurb - and the book asks, what if your ability to manage them was the difference between life and death?

Abbey explores the everyday dilemmas and emotive situations many of us can relate to from our training or current roles. We can all recognise the kinds of experiences like those she experiences working as an ITU Doctor; heart-wrenching situations involving those patients on the margin between life and death.

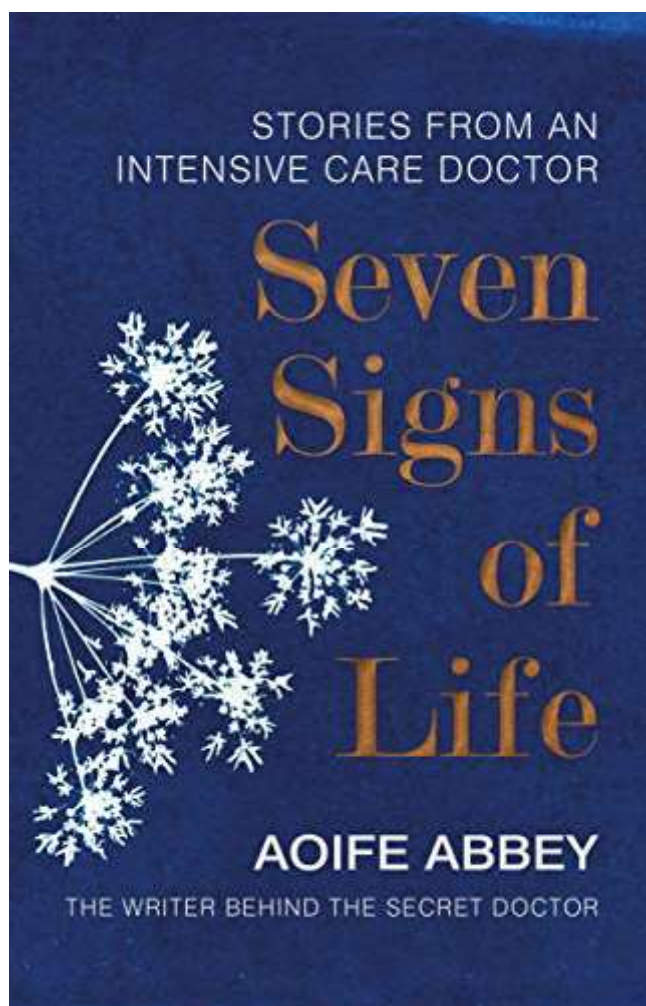
The book opens with Fear. She describes the dilemma of how much reassurance to give a seriously unwell and frightened patient. 'Will I be ok?', 'Yes you're in the right place, were here to look after you.' A familiar kind of conversation in patient care. She describes dealing with her own fear whilst treating a trauma patient, and the difficulty of how to give the patient information as events change and their condition fluctuates. Should we give a running narrative to patients in the name of transparency? Abbey's compassion shines through as she grapples with this and tries to reduce the patient's own fear.

Whilst many of her stories are by their nature quite dark and sad, Abbey cleverly brings a warmth to these scenarios by being open about her own doubts and fears. One example is the woman on an Oncology ward who died from a sudden massive PE during a nightshift and Aoiffe's resuscitation dilemma. Or the shock of the sudden death of a 'fit and well' patient just after anaesthetic induction.

In her second chapter, 'Grief', she deals with the difficulty of using appropriate and forthright language with patients. Most of us can relate to these stories from our own experiences, and were reminded to be bold, and not afraid to use the words 'dead', and 'death'. It's a reminder for us not to be afraid to be frank and honest in our language with patients. Even after many years of practice, how do we feel about saying the word 'Cancer' to our patients?

The 'Disgust' chapter gives some visceral descriptions of the smell of blood, body excretia, sputum, pus, and the stench of tarry melaena. Best read away from food, this chapter reminds us of the reality of human bodily function and how often it is more prominent at the edges of life. Whilst so much of a Doctor's role can be intellectualised, she reminds us not to forget the physical experiences of our patients and our role in these sometimes disgusting realities.

Abbey discusses her own mixed feelings of how to choose those patients who might be suitable for ITU, those with a chance of improvement and who have a reversible condition. In 'Hope' there is a heart wrenching



story of a young patient having had an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest. They showed positive signs, and there was hope, but ultimately their oxygen-deprived brain gave up. She describes how ITU Doctors must have hope despite the sometimes long odds. Hope gave her the motivation to continue to treat this patient even with a 2% chance of survival.

Abbey concludes with the idea that as Doctors we experience all these emotions interchangeably, not in isolation or consecutively, such is the nature of our job.

This is no *War Doctor* – you will probably not read anything here that you hadn't experienced in some way as a Junior Doctor. And it's also not a laugh-a-minute like *Trust Me I'm a Doctor*. But if you want a prompt to reflect on your practice – through these seven lenses – then read this book. Or if you're looking for a book to pass on to friends or family then these stories will give them a taste of what it means to practice medicine – the everyday trials and challenges that many of us have become used to.