

BOOK REVIEW

The Whistle-Blower: One man's battle against the medical establishment *by Joanna Sheldon*

Hardback, 196 pages
University of Buckingham Press
November 1917

The Whistle-Blower is a biography of a hero in medical ethics, Maurice Pappworth, and is written by his daughter, Joanna Sheldon. More poignantly it is her swansong – she did not live to see her work in print. Pappworth was her hero too, and with good reason.

Sheldon launches her account with the provocative introduction “When doctors become torturers: why the whistle had to blow”. She suggests that her father was always a relative outsider, subject to prejudice on account of being a Jew lacking the social capital valued by his peers. Lack of investment in the establishment may ultimately have served Pappworth who “...standing outside the magic circle of the medical establishment, picked up from his students what was going on.” As someone standing apart, he was able to challenge the establishment, and he duly did in his 1967 book *Human Guinea Pigs*, which detailed many unethical experiments on patients in the US and UK.

This book should not be read purely as an account of one man's battle with the establishment. Pappworth was someone to whom junior colleagues could come with their heavy consciences for advice and assistance. Having someone you can go to if your seniors are asking or even commanding you to abandon the principles your profession espouses remains critical. In a rich distillation of Pappworth's life and work, the author builds a picture of an approachable man with twinkly blue eyes and a quirky sense of humour whose commentary on medical practice – “...when medicine is rapidly becoming dehumanised because of emphasis on laboratory procedures and the domination of many medical schools by research workers...” – has contemporary relevance.

Sheldon argues that Pappworth emphasised a humane medicine built upon a good knowledge base, clinical reasoning, and a recognition of the common humanity in patients and colleagues alike – the knowledge, skills and attitudes approach that is the mantra of medical education. His *Primer of Medicine*, first published in 1960, ran to five editions and its very first chapter concerned ethics and professionalism, citing the various sources of the “Golden rule” – “*Love thy neighbour as thyself*” – and discussing the ethical codes that were already fading into empty ceremony. Unlike other medical textbooks, taken on by new editors and authors, Pappworth's *Primer* died with him.

History teaches us that professions do not treat whistle-blowers kindly. Whilst Joanna Sheldon's account does not disagree, it offers source material and an appropriately partisan analysis not only for historians but for those who would protect today's young doctors from moral erosion. As a medical historian, I approach “hero-biographies” with suspicion but I enjoyed this book, which prompted me to read Pappworth's original works, and I can strongly recommend it.

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November 2018

Published online at www.bshhm.org.uk.