

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Bed Absolute: a Teenage Diary of TB in the 1960s**

**by Barbara Salter**

Paperback, 328 pages

Barbara Salter, ISBN 9798523315060

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In 1959, at 13, Barbara Salter was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis (TB), and admitted to Crossley Sanatorium in Cheshire for treatment. She kept diaries during this period and has published them here with her adult comments.

By the early 1950s triple therapy for up to two years had become the standard TB treatment regimen. Surprisingly, nearly a decade later, reasonably healthy patients like Barbara were still being admitted to sanatoria for much of the duration of therapy: in her case, for over a year. Despite the discovery of effective medication, it was still considered important to be hospitalised for initial complete bed rest followed by graded exercise, with fresh air, sunshine and nourishing food. It was not until the so-called 'Madras experiment' in 1959 showed that patients on chemotherapy became non-infectious in two weeks and, if sent home to complete their treatment, did as well as those managed in hospital, that attitudes began to change, ultimately leading to the demise of TB sanatoria.

This book is unusual in being set in this transition period, at a time when post-war austerity was about to give way to the 'swinging Sixties'.

The regimented existence in hospital is reflected by repetition in the diary entries, a catalogue of temperature recording, weighing, bed-pans, visits by family and school friends, and decisions by doctors on continuing bed-rest or being allowed up for an hour or two a day; vital to the patient, but initially monotonous for the reader. However, gradually one gets sucked into the author's restricted world and becomes equally anxious whether this week's weight has increased or not, and if her temperature stays normal.

Barbara's parents could choose whether she should be admitted to an adult hospital like Crossley, or a paediatric unit, and chose Crossley; this meant the other patients were nearly all older, some are kind to her, some not. With the onset of puberty the author develops 'crushes' on several of the younger male patients. She and the more mature female patients have to cope with inappropriate examinations and behaviour by one of the physicians.

Barbara's father has an alcohol problem. Soon after her discharge from hospital he is jailed for embezzlement, with a major impact on the family and their finances. Although some schooling was provided in the sanatorium by visiting teachers, Barbara fell behind her peer group. It is gratifying to find that she made up for her difficult teenage years, having a successful family life, career and a CBE.

This book is ultimately a fascinating social and historical memoir that should appeal not only to historians of tuberculosis but to a much wider audience.

**Noel Snell**

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