CARING FOR THE COUNTRY

Caring for the Country

FAMILY DOCTORS IN
SMALL RURAL TOWNS

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To Carol,
the best thing that ever happened to me.

FOREWORD

It is an honor to write the foreword to *Caring for the Country: Family Doctors in Small Rural Towns*, by Howard K. Rabinowitz, MD. The stories in this book have special meaning for me: I grew up in Monongahela, a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania. My friends' parents worked in the coal mines and the steel mills. Family doctors—they were called general practitioners then—provided all my family's medical care; they treated my ear infections, removed my tonsils, and managed my sports injuries. My dad was a school-book salesman who called on the public schools in Nanty Glo, Bedford, and Lock Haven, PA. For more than a decade, I practiced rural medicine in upstate New York. Today I live in Oregon, a state with a large rural population and a looming crisis in the availability of rural health care services.

Health care in rural America is rich with stories—both of the physicians and the people in the communities they serve. One of every five Americans lives in a rural setting, and yet these rural inhabitants are often forgotten in discussions of the underserved in health care in the United States. Even more overlooked are the true heroes—the nine percent of the nation's physicians who have made a commitment to rural communities.¹ These doctors live the dream of service to others that was why—I thought—we chose careers in medicine.

Yet today, students and residents who share with their subspecialty professors that they plan rural family practice risk everything from solicitous but less-than-heartfelt encouragement (“Good for you. Rural people need doctors.”) to high-pressure exhortations not to “waste your career.”

Something seems to have happened to young American doctors over the past few decades. Altruism and service seem to be unfashionable, and *lifestyle* is a major concern. Medicine has, for many young doctors, come to mean a personal opportunity to advance one's career, rather than a commitment to care for patients.

This book tells of a program that identifies young physicians with the interest and courage to serve patients in small rural towns, and it chronicles what happened to ten of those physicians. It describes personal relationships that go beyond the examination room and tells how the doctor becomes metaphorically "part of the patient's family." Some might say that these physicians are a throwback to a time that has past. Maybe, but I think that these rural family physicians represent the best of American medicine, and we should have a lot more of them.

So, read this important book, and be inspired by the stories of the doctors. And be glad that there are programs such as the one at Jefferson Medical College that help educate the family physicians Americans need.

Robert B. Taylor, MD
Portland, Oregon

NOTE

1. Van Dis J. Where we live: health care in rural vs. urban America. *JAMA*. 2002; 287:108.

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