



# Blog of the Month

*AMPJ Blog of the Month: September 2021 Edition*

*Dr Beth Spurrier is a Junior Doctor based in the West Yorkshire region currently working in Palliative Care. For this month's APMJ blog post, she reviews one of summer reads: 'Seven signs of life.' Many thanks Dr Spurrier!*

*Interested in submitting something yourself, have any comments or questions on this piece? Email [submissions.apmj@gmail.com](mailto:submissions.apmj@gmail.com) or tweet us @APMJuniors*

Book review: Seven signs of life. Stories from an intensive care doctor. Aoife Abbey

Publisher: Arcade

Date of release: 15th October 2019

Length: 288 pages

ISBN: 9781948924825

In her book, 'Seven Signs of Life - Stories from an Intensive Care Doctor', Aoife Abbey reflects on her encounters with patients and colleagues during her time as a foundation doctor and intensive care registrar. The reflections are presented through a lens of what Abbey proposes are seven key human emotions (fear, grief, joy, distraction, anger, disgust and hope). Abbey's aim is to demonstrate how the same emotions are often shared by patients and doctors - although they may be experienced differently. The result is a very humanising series of stories.

One might ask why this book is relevant to palliative care. I chose this book for a number of reasons. Firstly, with critical care's monumental role in the COVID19 pandemic, it felt very appropriate and very relevant to learn more about the experiences of our colleagues in this specialty. In addition, despite the obvious differences, palliative care and intensive care medicine share some similarities. Firstly, we both care for patients who are (as Aoife puts it) between life and death. In intensive care, many patients are alive, but sedated, and on the brink of a terminal decline. Similarly our patients are alive, but are frail and vulnerable, often dealing with the prospect of impending death and the existential crisis this can bring. In intensive care, patients may be supported with their physiological function, but unable to command this for themselves and have no hope of meaningful awake time. In palliative care, during patients' final days, they may be breathing, but unable to communicate. In both settings, these patients could be said to be straddling two worlds - the world of the living and the dead. As such, I felt this book was a good choice for a palliative care doctor.

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Abbey's use of commonly shared emotions provides a nice framework for the book, and in combination with her reflective writing style, was very emotive in places. Abbey captures moments that, although written from a perspective of intensive care, many doctors will recognise. She describes them with a profoundness and presence of mind that can only have come from extensive reflection and soul-searching. This left me reflecting more on some of my own experiences, and I have written a list of reflections for my portfolio based on this.

On occasion, the descriptions and reflections can sound a little contrived. In places, it feels hard to believe that this is how Abbey genuinely thinks or feels about something, or the scenario can feel too clichéd. However, this may be the result of amalgamating different stories (which has been done to protect the identity of patients and colleagues), the passage of time and the presence of mind that comes with purposeful reflection and description for narrative's sake. I wonder if this is also because it is written for a non-medical audience and so greater description is needed for them to identify with Abbey as a human being, rather than a doctor.

My favourite and, what I felt to be the most thought-provoking chapter, was 'Hope'. In palliative care, where we often know that a cure isn't going to be possible for patients, hope is a really interesting concept. Often important and powerful, as well as challenging and painful, hope is fascinating. I found this a particularly moving, well-written and interesting chapter and would recommend that others read this.

Abbey also reflects a lot on what her patients need from her as their doctor - and some of these reflections are surprising and refreshing. For example, when dealing with angry or grieving relatives, Abbey's tranquil and considered perspective of these situations feels profound, and may be useful to juniors who feel uncomfortable in these situations.

Overall, this book was a worthwhile read - whichever specialty you're interested in. It took around 3-4 hours and each chapter could probably be read on its own. Throughout the book, there are several points that I think provide useful areas for personal reflection. At times, I think it's important to remember that this book has been written for the general public, which may explain some of the dramatisation and (what I felt to be) occasional over sentimentality. However, this feature is often found within this genre and therefore is not a reflection on Abbey's book alone. An interesting and emotive read!