



Less Medicine, More Health: 7 Assumptions That Drive Too Much Medical Care

H. Gilbert Welch

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The author of the highly acclaimed *Overdiagnosed* describes seven widespread assumptions that encourage excessive, often ineffective, and sometimes harmful medical care.

You might think the biggest problem in medical care is that it costs too much. Or that health insurance is too expensive, too uneven, too complicated—and gives you too many forms to fill out. But the central problem is that too much medical care has too little value.

Dr. H. Gilbert Welch is worried about too much medical care. It's not to deny that some people get too little medical care, rather that the conventional concern about "too little" needs to be balanced with a concern about "too much": too many people being made to worry about diseases they don't have—and are at only average risk to get; too many people being tested and exposed to the harmful effects of the testing process; too many people being subjected to treatments they don't need—or can't benefit from.

The American public has been sold the idea that seeking medical care is one of the most important steps to maintain wellness. Surprisingly, medical care is not, in fact, well correlated with good health. So more medicine does not equal more health; in reality the opposite may be true.

The general public harbors assumptions about medical care that encourage overuse, assumptions like it's always better to fix the problem, sooner (or newer) is always better, or it never hurts to get more information. *Less Medicine, More Health* pushes against established wisdom and suggests that medical care can be too aggressive. Drawing on his twenty-five years of medical practice and research, Dr. Welch notes that while economics and lawyers contribute to the excesses of American medicine, the problem is essentially created when the general public clings to these powerful assumptions about the value of tests and treatments—a number of which are just plain wrong.

By telling fascinating (and occasionally amusing) stories backed by reliable data, Dr. Welch challenges patients and the health-care establishment to rethink some very fundamental practices. His provocative prescriptions hold the potential to save money and, more important, improve health outcomes for us all.

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Date : Published March 3rd 2015 by Beacon Press

ISBN : 9780807071649

Author : H. Gilbert Welch

Format : Hardcover 240 pages

Genre : Health, Medicine, Nonfiction, Medical, Science

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Elizabeth says

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LESS MEDICINE, MORE HEALTH
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Author: Dr. H. Gilbert Welch

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George Smith says

As a retired lab tech grunt who toiled away trying to do justice to the tons of specimens submitted for long lists of tests that are ordered by Physicians, I can assure you that more testing is definitely not leading to better care. Welch is a wise physician and I hope his critical view of testing clears the benches of many of those stupid, trivial test requests that we get in the lab. Cut out the cover-your-butt off-the-wall test requests and all of us will benefit-particularly the patient who needs careful timely diagnostic testing. This is a great book.

Elizabeth Theiss says

I once had a wonderful physician who used to tell me, "I'll give you my medical-legal opinion and then I'll tell you what I think." She taught me to always ask doctors to think a bit more about their recommendations. If the test is positive, what would we do differently? What are the possible secondary consequences? What happens if we do nothing?

Dr. Welch, a primary care physician, has given us a thoughtful but radical critique of common medical practices, based on epidemiological statistics. In other words, he looks at data on outcomes of medical interventions to find out whether common medical practices contribute to or diminish overall health and well-being.

The most controversial claims that Dr. Welch makes are about the wisdom of foregoing routine medical screening tests including mammograms, colonoscopies, and PSA screenings. He cites epidemiological studies that show no improvement in overall outcomes for those who are screened versus those who are not. This is counterintuitive because the medical community has stressed for years that early detection is key to surviving cancer. Empirically, data shows few marginal advantages to early screening. So why not be screened on the off chance you would gain from it? Welch points out that screening carries substantial health costs as well because it leads to treatments that may diminish quality of life while failing to deliver the promised quantity of life. Worst of all, most treatments have side-effects that require further treatment, ultimately resulting in cascades of medical problems.

While Welch is highly critical of many common medical interventions, he is not dismissive of medicine. He finds common tests like blood pressures quite useful when understood in appropriate context. Many people develop "white coat" high blood pressure, that is high pressures due to anxieties associated with being in a medical clinic. If treated aggressively, blood pressure can plummet causing confusion and blackouts. Thus, to be useful, blood pressures must be monitored, not assumed to be accurate at a single moment in time.

I found Welch's arguments persuasive. More medicine does not seem to produce more health in many cases. I doubt I will submit to another mammogram without cause to believe something is wrong. The value in this book is the information that allows readers to make better health choices through evidence-based medicine. Welch is an empiricist, not a demagogue. The seven assumptions about health that he debunks are well worth consideration when making health choices.

This is an important book because it encapsulates much that is wrong with the way we think about health. It echoes what Atul Gawande has to say about end of life care, that quality of life should count in our definition of health. Medical intervention often trades off quality of life in exchange for a few more weeks or months of

survival. Whether this trade-off is worthwhile should be a thoughtful choice, not a foregone conclusion.

Joan says

I'm glad I read this at this time! I may be needing to make a decision about cochlear implants in the near future and I think this book will help me with the decision. I'm also reminded how I got hounded and nagged into allowing my wisdom teeth to be removed and I really wish I hadn't done so. I was sick for two months after that surgery and there was no good reason to remove them. Welch says only get them removed if there is pain and there wasn't any pain. GRRRRR. It got me into trouble at work because I was out for 4 days instead of the promised 2 days. I deliberately scheduled the surgery on a Friday so I would have the weekend to recuperate and I barely made it into work the following Friday. I only did so because I was afraid of my boss at that time. Basically, his opinion is that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I'll remember that from now on. This doctor is at Dartmouth, and clearly knows his medicine. He also has done a lot of reading on studies of what patients really want. These helped him formulate his thesis stated above. I think we all could stand reading this book to get a better mindset before engaging in any medical practice. Or for that matter, alternative medicine as well.

Peacejanz says

Wow! This is a great book for any of us at any age. It is so easy to fall into old assumptions that are not valid. Dr. Welch is a physician on the faculty of Dartmouth Medical School. He counters some ideas that most of us have such as the sooner you are treated, the better. This is not to say that you should ignore physical or emotional problems but you do not always have to rush to get some things "healed." Best of all like a good academic professor, Dr. Welch provides the source of all he asserts. There is a lengthy listing of references articles and books at the end of the book so non-believers can read the research and results for him or her self. A lengthy list of academic reviewers is also included. Anyone concerned about health of any loved ones would do well to read this book. A wonderful addition to that shelf of health books.

Sally says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this very sensible discussion about interacting with the healthcare system in such a way that you avoid having your life become unnecessarily medicalized. An ounce of "prevention," in the form of screenings and tests for the asymptomatic, all too often leads to worse health outcomes rather than better ones. I recommend it.

Cathy says

About a year ago, I found the book "Overdiagnosed: Making People Sick in Pursuit of Health". Upon hearing the audiobook I felt I had finally found an author who shared my opinion on the screening and diagnoses made in health care.

This new book by Welch seems to be directed to the general population. It is less detailed and technical, and

the tone is lighter. However, I would recommend it also to all who provide health care.

The author discusses many of the myths that patients and carers have in relation to health. I know that many will refuse to accept the arguments presented, but the truth is that the diagnostic and therapeutic aggressiveness hasn't necessarily contributed to better health outcomes.

As a family doctor, I notice that many patients are uncomfortable when I explain the pros and cons of a screening or treatment, when I explain that the new medicaments aren't always the best option, when I ask them to give their body some time to recover, or when I propose a joint decision. People are still accustomed to a paternalistic medicine and look askance at anyone who doesn't pass multiple exams or doesn't always give a medication. By the time I explain that a particular test that they want is not appropriate, I notice that they feel like I had devalued their symptoms or I just want to save money. This approach obviously requires that I spend a long time justifying a particular medical decision. It is also necessary to adjust the patient's expectations, as well as the physician's expectations. It is a long and hard road, but so far I can say it is worth it.

The message brought by Welch in "Less Medicine, More Health" is the battle of many doctors, though not at all covered in the course of medicine (at least in my country). This is a book I recommend to all, so that all decisions are the most informed possible and the results more satisfactory.

Rana says

The first time I've ever had the statistics used when describing medical probabilities. The power to ignore anything under a 100% increase is a huge gift.

Carolyn Thomas says

This book caught my eye because the title sums up my own philosophy in a nutshell. With eloquence and humour Dr. Welch states the case for his belief that too many people are being made to worry about diseases they don't have and are at only average risk to get, too many people are being tested and exposed to the harmful effects of the testing process, and too many people are being subjected to treatments they don't need or cannot benefit from.

Below I list the seven assumptions Dr. Welch covers that drive too much medical care, and after each one I give a short quote from the chapter.

- 1) All risks can be lowered. "It's not possible to eliminate all risk - nor is it desirable. And with medical care trying creates risks of its own."
- 2) It's always better to fix the problem. "Fixing things is a bit of a gamble. There's a chance that it makes you a whole lot better, but there's also a chance it makes you a whole lot worse."
- 3) Sooner is always better. "When considering screening, recall the general principles. Many must be involved to potentially benefit a few. Harms are expected; false alarms are a certainty; some degree of overdiagnosis - and overtreatment - is likely."
- 4) It never hurts to get more information. "More clinical data not only can create anxiety for patients, they can also initiate cascades that lead to unneeded medical care."
- 5) Action is always better than inaction. "But the reality is that the human body can heal and that all of our

actions have unintended consequences. Thus, inaction can often be the preferred course."

6) Newer is always better. "In medical care too often the word 'new' is associated with the word 'improved' - when it would be better associated with the word 'untested' ".

7) It's all about avoiding death. "Disturbing truth: A fixation on preventing death diminishes life."

This really is a fascinating book and well worth reading, even if you - or maybe especially if - you think you will disagree.

Leah says

...too much medical care has too little value.

I am not a doctor nor do I work in the healthcare industry. I'm just an ordinary U.S. citizen who happened to wonder about many of the assumptions Welch addresses in Less Medicine, More Health, which is why I requested a copy.

Welch's writing style was conversational and easy to understand. While there were significant amounts of data and stats discussed as well as medical terminology, at no point did I feel like he was talking over my head. He also succeeded at presenting his case with evidence to support his argument WITHOUT resorting to sensationalism.

I found "Assumption #7: It's All About Avoiding Death" offered me the least new information but the most validation. I couldn't agree more with Welch! If someone could only read one chapter in this book, I would point them to "Assumption #7" because I think it has the most potential as far as life-changing perspectives go. Everyone should focus more on living than doing everything they can to avoid death. Like my sister always says, it's about quality (of life) not quantity.

Welch seemed to genuinely want the reader to ask questions, engage the conversation, and THINK for themselves. His consistency in promoting critical thought combined with his approach to the subject were what earned this book a high rating. It also did not hurt that he donates all royalties from his books to charity, which further supports his case, in my opinion.

4 stars

Received hardcover from the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Below are a few quotes I bookmarked:

"You may not consider that a harm, but remember health is not simply a state of physical being--it's also a state of mind. It's more than a little ironic for a health-care system to scare people about their health, particularly when we know that doing so can adversely affect their health (65)."

"Websites will pick it up, and so will Dr. Oz and the rest of the medical self-help and infotainment industry (78)" I found the word "infotainment" quite catchy.

"But that's me. I tend to mark down the benefit of screening because it happens in the future, while the harms are much more immediate. Avoiding death isn't my top priority anyway; I'd rather avoid a lingering cognitive decline in a long-term facility (not that I'm likely to be successful) (82)."

"Just because you have data doesn't mean you have information. Having information doesn't mean you have useful knowledge. And wisdom--well, that's a whole new ball game (95)."

"The fact that healing without intervention is possible can be lost on a highly medicalized society. Some problems will disappear on their own. Others persist, but we adapt to them--and feel better. And still others wax and wane. Ironically, medical care may obscure our capacity to heal: people who have a problem seek care--and get better. These stories of 'success' lead us to conclude that healing was not possible without medical care (133-134)."

"There's no one right approach to anticipatory medicine *because there's no one right approach to life and death*. It's personal (182)."

James Veliky says

I loved this book. I have been a practicing Optometrist for 41 years and I learned a lot. Dr. Welch wrote this book for the general public but I would recommend it be read by everyone in health care. I am from the little town in western Pennsylvania -Donora - that had the killer smog in 1948 that he references in the book so this resonated a little more with me.

Primum non nocere-"first do no harm" is the mantra of all in health care. But as Dr. Welch painfully points out," the only Doctor that doesn't do harm is the one who doesn't see patients". This book is well worth your time.

Beth says

I grabbed this book at the ALA Midwinter Meeting because it seemed right up my alley. And I was correct!

About a year ago I read "How We Do Harm," written by Otis Brawley--the Chief Medical Officer of the American Cancer Society. He was the first perspective I'd read on the potential harms of screening for different types of cancers, and it blew me away. While this book isn't entirely about screening for cancer, it certainly addresses it, and I feel like everyone should read this important information. Dr. Welch comes up with a really great metaphor for different types of cancers, "the barnyard pen." Cancers include turtles (slow growing), rabbits (faster but containable), and birds (already gone). Screening only benefits the rabbits, and increases stress and treatment complications in the turtles. Between Welch's and Brawley's books, I feel like there's an answer for people who criticize professional recommendations to reduce the frequency of screenings. Not only that, but he encourages doctors to be upfront about the possibility of abnormal screenings that are meaningless. I still remember how much less stress I had after a pap when the PA who performed it let me know that nearly half of the results in her office have some sort of abnormality. Half! If I got a call back about an abnormality after she told me that, it would have been stressful, sure, but so much less stressful.

Of course, screening is just a small part of the book. Brawley also addresses the concept of having too much information on personal health. In fact, this chapter encouraged me to STOP researching so darn much about some of my health issues, because he's right; a lot of what I've come up with just noise, and not very meaningful, but it sure does manage to stress me out!

This book was short and succinct, which I greatly appreciated. Also, Welch's sense of humor may very well remind you of your dad, if he were just a little bit funnier. I definitely appreciated this about the book. This is a very easy to read title on this very important topic, with plenty of examples to support his theses.

Tchipakkan says

I just finished Less medicine, more health: 7 Assumptions that Drive Too Much Medical Care, and heartily recommend it!

The seven assumptions are All Risks can be Lowered, It's always better to Fix the problem, Sooner is Always Better, It never hurts to get more Information, Action is always better than inaction, Newer is Always Better, and It's all about Avoiding Death.

Notice those "always" and "never"s? Dr. Welch does recognize that every situation is different and sometimes our new technology is just what is needed. It's assuming that all the situations are the same that sinks us.

Completely side stepping the monetary costs of modern medicine, he talks about the medical costs of using these assumptions as if they were universally appropriate.

On the Avoiding Death assumption, I'd just point out that given how many people would rather risk diabetes, heart disease, etc. than give up chocolate, the convenience of fast food, alcohol, smoking, and other of life's joys, I think it's pretty clear that quality of life is more important to most people than just adding a few more days.

He also mentions (as I have so often pointed out) that sometimes the added "life" is spent uncomfortably, in the hospital. Would you rather have three months at home, or six months in the hospital? Added life should imply an ability to actually live it. I also liked the story from the early days of palliative care where the people who opted for palliation lived three months (on average) longer than those who chose interventions. Live worth living has got to be better than being a guinea pig.

Under the "lowering risks" assumption Welch talks about statistics- pointing out that two or three percentage points don't make a huge difference, he suggests that you shouldn't worry until something is two or three times as likely to cause problems.

He also suggests waiting several years before trying a new treatment (unless it's your only chance). Wait to see how it plays out in the real world. He tells of a doctor who opted for the all metal hip replacement because he knew that they usually needed replacing every 9 years (how many recipients are told that before it's time to have it replaced?) and wanted longer between major operations, but the new metal ones apparently leaked cobalt into his system, poisoning him, which gave him a lot of psychiatric symptoms, complicating the diagnosis.

He also agreed with my uncle Dewey, the doctor, that screening doesn't tend to help much, except making people more scared and get more medical care that doesn't enhance health. (data vs. useful information). Actually, this may make this a life changing book for me. My kids have told me for years that they didn't want to hear all the "fascinating medical trivia" I'd accumulated. I'm now feeling a bit embarrassed that I needed to read it in a book before what they'd told me repeatedly sunk in.

Another point he made (about cancers) is that some can be left to watch, you don't always have to do everything, or do it immediately. Often problems resolve themselves. If you enjoy perspectives about medicine from the inside, I heartily recommend this book! (I know I'll be looking for his other titles.)

Jeff Brown says

This review was written for LibraryThing Early Reviewers. 4.5 stars.

Lately I have been taking the time to read a few books on health/nutrition every year so that I am better informed about decisions I make for my well being. This book was a worthy first choice for 2015.

The author basically makes the case for less medical intervention for non-acute medical care and end of life situations. I've always thought that nature more or less knows best, and people need to get out of the way of nature when it comes to health issues. To me medication is in general a bad idea. Don't get me wrong - if I get a bad headache or am sore from exercise, I'll still take some ibuprofen, and if I am sick I'll still take cold medicine to sleep, but I won't make a habit of it. But I try to think about what is wrong with me and why, and if there is something I can change to avoid taking something in the first place. I think that too often taking a pill can be taking the easy way out when a behavioral change is what is really needed for your health. I take a look at my own mother as an example - she had been taking statins for high cholesterol for several years. Doctors recommend them for just about everyone these days, saying they help and do no harm. Well my mother - like MANY people - was suffering from significant leg pain and fatigue. Me and my sister convinced her to improve her diet and exercise and talk to her doctor about getting off statins. He agreed to give it a try - and she is feeling a lot better, and eating better and going to the gym several times a week for the first time in her life. Honestly, how much longevity would you be willing to trade at 72 at the price of fatigue and leg pain for the rest of your life? It's not a question with a clear answer, but it is one worth asking and looking for what the actual answer is. One of the main points the author makes is that there IS no answer for everyone. Some folks say 5 years wouldn't be worth leg pain, others would trade it for 5 days. Find out what the real benefit is statistically likely to be for you, and decide what choice is right for you.

The book also brings up the issue around whether or not ignorance really is bliss sometimes. These days you can go on the internet, and quickly convince yourself that a pimple is terminal cancer. Self prognosis can be a dangerous thing - you may negatively impact your health more through worry than from whatever it is you are worried about. And this can even extend to medical testing - sometimes treating a condition (or just knowing you have it & worrying about it) is worse for you than the condition itself.

The author wraps up talking about end of life care. These days medicine has gotten good enough that it can turn positively ghoulish and Frankenstein-like for the old and sick. I've heard the argument made that when our pets are old and in pain we have the decency to have them put down, but we won't do the same for people. And it is worse than that - often we keep people alive long past when nature intended them to be, and add only unhappiness to their lives. He recounts the death of his own parents, and how much more humane they were than someone who ends their days in a hospital bed.

The book tackles these and several other issues, and generally does it in a light, humorous and concise way. He also present his case with facts and data - his case usually being that most of the time you really are just OK, and you are either fine or will heal up good as new with a little patience. And of course he does acknowledge that there are plenty of situations where medical intervention is necessary and beneficial - it's not that medicine isn't good and doesn't work, it is just overused.

A worthy read just to hear a valid point of view that helps you think about how you want to handle your health.

Bob Clare says

As an emergency physician my job mostly involves reassuring people that they DON'T have a serious illness when they're worried that they DO. Many simply aren't satisfied unless I've ordered a lot of "tests." This is not simply my opinion--many studies bear this out as true. Doing less is very difficult when all the incentives point to doing more. I believe over-testing, over-diagnosis, and over-treatment are the real causes behind America's abysmal track record. We spend nearly twice as much per capita as other nations to far worse outcomes. The wealthy receive too much testing and the poor too little. Dr Welch makes a great case for less medicine and how this often leads to better health outcomes. One thing for certain is that the more doctors reside within a community the more that community spends on healthcare--but mostly to no better outcomes. Although I found Dr Welch's style a little too folksy and self-deprecating for my tastes, the message is spot on. A good read for both doctors and patients.
