

First Patients: The Incredible True Stories of Pioneer Patients

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First Patients is a captivating medical history that centers the patients whose bravery made today's scientific advancements possible.

Rod Tanchanco's *First Patients* is an engaging history of medicine that delves into the human side of groundbreaking medical discoveries and procedures.

The book deals with often forgotten medical pioneers, including patients and doctors. Its ten chronological chapters each cover one story of a scientific breakthrough, focusing on the brave, sometimes desperate, patients at their centers. Throughout, the emphasis is on the humanity of medicine—a theme honored through the book's careful balance of personal stories with technical details.

While there are profiles of the doctors and scientists whose tireless work made the covered treatments possible, it's the book's patient profiles that are its most impactful feature: theirs are names and stories that tend to vanish from the historical record. Here, their bravery is a highlight—if one that diminishes as the book progresses. Indeed, in the book's later chapters, the patients are considered less than the doctors and scientists who helped them. Still, empathy is maintained for the people who were involved in each breakthrough throughout.

For instance, in "The Patient Zero Scapegoat," a chapter dedicated to the AIDS epidemic, the book centers Gaetan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant who was wrongly believed to be the first person to bring HIV to the US. Warnings against blaming the spread of a disease on individuals and single communities are forwarded, with the reminder that such blame is often mislaid, and that such decisions only foster hatred and mistrust.

By centering on the people who lived through terrifying procedures and suffered from unknown diseases, the book contextualizes medicine for all. It is sympathetic in addressing people's feelings, fears, and motivations, too. And in addition to such nuanced positions, descriptions of medical conditions and machinery abound. Such facts combine with careful technical details, resulting in an air of authority. Nonetheless, the book's science is made intelligible to lay readers because of its precise and straightforward prose, and because of the fact that each complicated concept is translated through parenthetical explanations and apt analogies. An involving account of the evolution of medicine is also included; the progression of the book's chapters reifies this sense of progress.

First Patients is a captivating medical history that deals with an subject too often forgotten: the patients whose bravery made today's scientific advancements possible.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (January 14, 2022)

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