

Not in Vain: A Promise Kept

Melissa Mullamphy

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Not in Vain is a powerful memoir that underscores the importance of fighting for loved ones while they are undergoing medical distress.

Melissa Mullamphy's memoir *Not in Vain* uses the heartbreaking experience of her mother's death to encourage patient advocacy.

In May of 2010, Mullamphy's sixty-eight-year-old mother, Connie, watched an episode of Dr. Oz about ovarian cancer that prompted her to feel her own abdomen, in which she discovered a palpable mass. She called her daughter and went to the emergency room, where the roller coaster of cancer diagnosis and treatment began.

Medical mistakes compounded over the subsequent months—including a staff member putting the wrong ID bracelet on her wrist, another starting treatment before sharing Connie's diagnosis, and a doctor ignoring chemo toxicity—until her agonizing death on December 4th of the same year. The chaos and drama of those few months thrust Mullamphy into depression fueled by PTSD and anxiety. Her book covers the horrors of her experiences, and it also includes suggestions and resources for other patient advocates.

The book is organized by month, progressing through Connie's cancer treatment in chronological order. Before chapter one, though, the introduction chronicles Mullamphy's PTSD experience after her mother's death, which puts the following chapters into emotional context. Checklists at the end of each chapter detail what Mullamphy learned, suggesting what advocates for patients should do when dealing with doctors: trust but verify, get to know your nurses, and keep a list of medicines doctors give you or your loved one, among other recommendations. Mullamphy shows empathy for patients without family for support by acknowledging the difficulties that Connie faced, even with several family members present to advocate for her. The most valuable piece of advice—and a repeated refrain throughout the book—is that communication is the “keystone to patient trust.”

Mullamphy's strong, consistent voice is immersive and absorbing. Her casual language results in emotional intimacy, while her no-nonsense attitude reflects the gravity of the subject matter. While the book centers on the cancer experience and offers a cursory glance at Connie's life prior to the events of the memoir, it discloses just enough background information to make Connie's personality tangible and Mullamphy's emotions distinct. And the book's conclusion includes a final, brief example of medical malpractice, drawing on Mullamphy's own experiences several years after her mother's death.

Emphasizing the power of self-education, balanced respect for doctors, and persistent patient advocacy, *Not in Vain* is a memorable memoir that underscores the importance of fighting for loved ones while they are undergoing medical distress.

AIMEE JODOIN (April 21, 2022)

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