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Tales of an island surgeon

June 04, 2012 | Chelsea Conaboy

THIS STORY APPEARED IN **The Boston Globe**

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Dr. Timothy Lepore seems plucked from fiction.

Nantucket's only full-time surgeon is a recognized expert on the tick-borne illness babesiosis, a conservative and the island's only abortion provider, and an animal lover who collects road kill and keeps "mice-icles" in his freezer for his hawk, Ajax, a pet and hunting partner. The specialist and sometimes veterinarian also counsels alcoholics and addicts, attends to vacationing politicians, and treats tourists who take a tumble drunk on a summer's night and end up with "cobblestone rash."

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New York Times reporter Pam Belluck met Lepore in the summer of 2007, when she profiled him for the newspaper's American Album series. She spent about three years following his work and learning about the wide network of people who call Lepore their doctor. Her new book, "Island Practice," gives readers an inside look at the peculiar challenges of health care on the island while reflecting on those that all communities face.

Lepore is a contrarian, Belluck said. He is a healer and a gun collector, a surgeon who loves to shoot.

"He has this sort of brash, almost cavalier persona, and you can tend to forget that he is dealing with real life-and-death situations all the time," she said.

He also has a tenderness that harkens back to an old style of medicine, in which the doctor is at the center of a community, on call at all hours.

Belluck said she never tired of her subject. He was unpredictable.

She recalled checking in with him by phone. Lepore told her he was in a field, trying to help a horse with cyanide poisoning.

"All night at the party I'm thinking about this horse. What's going to happen to this horse?" she said.

Lepore's emotions comes through clearly in a chapter that tells of a rash of suicides by teens and young adults on the island.

"Nantucket is different," Lepore said in the book. "If you can't make it here, it sort of pushes you over the edge. The social isolation, the drug and alcohol issues, the socioeconomic disparities, I think that pushes people."

Lepore rebels against the modern medical model of Partners HealthCare, which bought Nantucket Cottage Hospital in 2007. He objected to changes that hospital leaders and Partners wanted to make, including adding a second operating room, and asking physicians to join a large physician's organization.

Still, hospital leaders know what Lepore means to the island.

"My personal nightmare is succession planning for Tim Lepore," Dr. Margot Hartmann, the chief executive, said in the book. "There are no Tims out there."

Certainly not ones with the same talents and quirks. But Belluck said she hopes some readers will recognize Lepore in doctors they know, "somebody past or somebody present." Lepore is committed to his patients, she said.

Belluck's book will be released Tuesday and she will speak during the opening night of the Nantucket Book Festival on June 15.

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