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BOOKS

Life of a Nantucket Surgeon

By **Tara Parker-Pope** July 27, 2012 12:01 am

In her new book, “Island Practice,” the New York Times reporter Pam Belluck tells the story of Dr. Timothy Lepore, a quirky 67-year-old physician who for the past 30 years has been the only surgeon working on the island of Nantucket. But Dr. Lepore (rhymes with peppery) is no ordinary surgeon. Life on an island, even one that has become a summer playground to the rich and famous, requires a certain amount of resourcefulness and flexibility.

Over the years Dr. Lepore has taken it upon himself to deliver whatever type of medical care his island inhabitants need, often challenging conventional notions of medicine and redefining what it means to be a healer. While his surgical skills have been used for minor repairs and lifesaving procedures, he often works as a general practitioner, treating everyday ailments, and has emerged as a leading expert on tick-borne diseases. Distraught island residents call on him for counseling and comfort, and he even steps into the role of veterinarian when needed.

I recently spoke with Ms. Belluck about the time she spent with Dr. Lepore, what we all can learn from medical care on an island and why this island surgeon’s story may someday make great television. Here’s our conversation.

Q.

How did you first learn about Dr. Lepore and his island practice?

A.

We were doing an occasional series for the paper, and my job was to find somebody in my region who hadn’t been written about but who was doing something

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interesting in an interesting place. I was considering this guy in Maine who was running a nude bowling league, but that would be hard to illustrate. There was a guy in Vermont who wanted the state to secede and become its own country. But for some reason I had saved this Tufts alumni newsletter that said one of the alums was the only surgeon on Nantucket. He was so engaging, I ended up going out there and did a profile on him.

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Because he's one of only a few doctors on the island, even though he's a surgeon, he also does general practice. He's the football team doctor, the school doctor, the tick disease expert. He acts as a psychologist. He acts as a vet sometimes. By dint of his personality and the role he needs to play, he kind of does everything. There is a lot of serious stuff he deals with, and that's balanced against this interesting, kind of funny and quirky personality.

Q.

I think of Nantucket as a posh summer tourist destination. Were you surprised to find such a quirky character there?

A.

I thought of it as this rich summer haven, but there is this whole year-round population that is really interesting and diverse and has to scuffle for a living. Even the hardship was surprising. You think any place is accessible, but there are a lot of times where you cannot get on or off the island, and you can't get what you need. Even though they have fast ferries and airplanes now, you're still at the mercy of the elements, and that creates a lot of drama.

Q.

What kinds of challenges has Dr. Lepore faced?

A.

Part of it is the fact that as the only surgeon, you kind of need to do everything, and you may not know how to do something. There was a guy who came home, forgot to pick up potatoes, and his wife stabbed him in the heart. It's the kind of stab wound that only 10 percent of patients make it to the hospital alive, and 1 percent will survive. Dr. Lepore had never seen anything like this before, but there was no time to get the guy off the island. So he had to reach in and get the heart started. There wasn't the right equipment to sew him up, and they had only six units of blood,

which is not that much. But he's an encyclopedia of arcane facts, and he remembered that in the 1800s they used black silk thread for this kind of injury. They found some black silk thread, and he managed to close this guy's heart and get it beating again. The guy survived and became a marathon runner.

There is a field hospital-type feeling to it. You're not under fire, but there is making do with what you have and flying by the seat of your pants. Often the weather is bad, and he has never done it before, but he just has to do it.

Q.

In many ways he sounds like the doctor we all wish we had. Does he come across like that traditional, ideal doctor?

A.

Most general surgeons see the patient during surgery and maybe check up on them after. Someone else takes care of them beforehand, and someone else is their family doctor. They really don't need to know that much about the patient or family or life or other issues. Dr. Lepore knows he's going to see that person again, whether it's at the grocery store or a school committee meeting or the gas station. It's a small island. He really gets very involved with all these different aspects of their lives. He doesn't just do their surgery. People will come to him just because they feel like talking to somebody. He has this no-nonsense, little bit profane, kind of unorthodox counseling approach. He refuses to be measured by 18-minute office visits. He drives his nurses nuts because they are always trying to move him along.

People drop by his house, and he goes to their houses. He got an e-mail from a patient who was freaked out because there was a big spider in her apartment. She e-mailed him a picture of the spider. He was really interested. He looked up what kind it was, and it made her feel really good that he was on the other end looking up this spider.

Q.

Does he make a good living? Does he take insurance?

A.

He takes insurance, but he also takes people who can't pay at all. He will allow people to pay him in kind. There was a South African immigrant who needed an

appendectomy and didn't have any money. Dr. Lepore knew he worked at a place with really good oatmeal raisin cookies. He told him, "Bring me a couple of cookies every week." The guy did, and that was his payment.

One of the undercurrents of the book is that his hospital on Nantucket is now run by Partners Health Care, the big health care corporation that runs Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women's Hospital. They have instituted some new systems, but he flouts many of them. He says, "Nobody is going to manage my time. Nobody is going to tell me what to do." They can't really complain because they need him.

Q.

Nantucket is such a beautiful place. Why don't more surgeons live there?

A.

It's a hard place to make a living exclusively as a surgeon because there isn't as much surgery as you would get in a city hospital, and the kinds of cases you get are all over the map. You can't specialize, and many surgeons want to specialize. He also has to be very good at knowing what is best for him to do there and what would be best to farm out. We think of surgeons as having huge egos about surgery, but Dr. Lepore is very much like, "It's just cut, sew and tie; anybody can do it." But the issue is what happens after the surgery, what's the recovery like? At his hospital they don't have dedicated recovery nurses, they don't have enough blood. If six or eight hours after the surgery the patient may have some complication or need something his hospital won't be able to provide, he has to be able to anticipate that.

Q.

In addition to serious human problems, he has also treated animals. What kind of veterinary care does he provide?

A.

Once I called him to check in and he said, "Can't talk now. I'm in a field with a horse." Once he was having a dinner party, and somebody called up with an eagle that was hurt, and they wanted to bring it over. His wife said, "No. He's not a veterinarian. We've got people here. Don't bring it over." Of course, they brought the eagle over, and Dr. Lepore took a look at him, shot him up with steroids and went to back to dinner. And the eagle was fine.

Q.

Your book was recently optioned for television by the same people who created “24” and “Friday Night Lights.” How do you think Dr. Lepore’s story will play out on a televised show?

A.

I don’t know what kind of show they are planning, but the way I’d envision it would be as a sort of combination of “House” with a “Northern Exposure” kind of sensibility. You have a character who is an eccentric doctor with a sense of humor and a large amount of talent in serious life-and-death situations. And you have a collection of independent, spirited people who are the sort of people who want to live 30 miles out to sea. Some of them have gone there to reinvent themselves, some want to be away from what they call “America.” You get this intersection of high class and lower class. He’s treated Kennedy relatives and John Kerry and Jimmy Buffett, but he’s also treated a South African immigrant who pays him in cookies. They also have this community that can be very close-knit, and things happen there. It’s amazing. Every time I talk to the guy, there is something else happening. There was the first bank robbery in 200 years, or a woman who tried to steal a boat and jumped off the side. Interesting things happen there all the time.

Q.

Who should play Dr. Lepore on television?

A.

Various people on the island have suggested everyone from John Malkovich, Robert Duvall and Robin Williams to the guy who played Cliff Clavin on “Cheers” (John Ratzenberger). Dr. Lepore said, “I think Brad Pitt.”