As A Heart Patient, I Was Fascinated!

An over-the-shoulder look at a major heart surgery center, with gripping accounts from the OR to the boardroom. Americans now spend more money on hearts than on new passenger cars. To understand this remarkable trend, Charles R. Morris embedded himself with a surgical team at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, one of the world’s premier cardiac surgery and transplant centers. Given unprecedented access, Morris witnessed sophisticated operations and observed the tense meetings where surgeons relentlessly criticize their own performance. In thrilling detail, Morris recounts a late-night against-the-clock harvest run to secure a precious transplantable organ; the heart-breaking story of a child’s failed transplant; a trainee surgeons brutal daily regimen; and much more. Along the way, Morris documents the fifty years of research and hundreds of millions of dollars that have been expended on creating a reliable mechanical heart, and he steps back to reflect on how doctors think and how they judge each other, what is really driving health care costs, and the future of health care policy in America.

My Personal Review:
This is a fascinating book, whether one is a heart patient oneself or not. The hospital in discussion is Columbia-Presbyterian in New York. Morris embedded himself there, staying in the cardiac area, attending surgeries sitting in the back near the nurses, attended staff meetings, all that stuff. He opens with a little history of heart surgery and an typical patient. Incidentally, although this is written for a popular audience, he does assume some slight knowledge on the part of the reader - for example, he doesn’t stop to define comorbidity as in Like many heart patients, Goldfarb suffers from a variety of comorbidities... He describes how doctors and nurses suit up and create a sterile field around the patients, and then pretty much cut-for-cut describes Mr. Goldfarbs heart valve replacement.
He describes the different specializations within cardio-thoracic surgery: its not just heart surgeons in general. Theres the bypass specialists, the anesthesiologists, the pacemaker-and-defibrillator surgeons (he doesnt mention it, but in my experience they are usually called electrophysiologists, or EPs), the pediatric specialists.

Of particular interest: the difference between those surgeries in which the patient is put on a heart pump, and off-pump surgeries. The various range of outcomes of transplants. He describes a failed pediatric transplant - the patient dies. No avoiding the tough issues. The whole way the transplant process works - he goes along with a harvest team to get the heart from a donor, and talks about teams from other hospitals there to harvest other organs from the same donor, and what its like to have several different teams working on one body.

Of interest to heart failure patients (of which, I am one) would be the discussion of the LVAD, and also the chapter on the development of cath labs used by cardiologists, which is something different from cardiac surgeons (if youve had an angiogram, youve been in a cath lab.)

And there's a big section on The Problem With Drug Companies and another on how to determine best practices as well as some controversial issues about evaluating different studies on various practices and on rating the hospitals. If you are interested in how statistics are used, and how meta-studies that evaluate the combined results of numerous previous studies can be gamed to produce varying results, youll find this section as interesting as I did. Research studies play a huge part in how the patients get treated, and its quite useful to know that there are studies, and then there are *studies*.

Its a fascinating book - this barely begins to describe it. Hes a good writer, and the book moves right along; we get to know the doctors and nurses as people. He has editorial comment as well as just description of whats going on, and its useful input for anyone who is following the USs continuing struggle over how we provide health care and to whom.

Interestingly, I also happened, quite accidentally, to recently re-read Lewis Thomas The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine-Watcher - which was written about 25 years ago - and it was interesting to compare his descriptions of medical practices and hospital routines from the 1930s and 1950s to Morriss of half a century later. You might find the same pairing of readings equally interesting.

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