

Foreword

By Howard Markel, M.D., Ph.D.
and Alexandra Minna Stern, Ph.D.

No one can deny that medicine, health care, and disease are issues of utmost importance to Americans in the twenty-first century. With this principle in mind, the University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine has entered into a partnership with the University of Michigan Press to publish a new series of books exploring controversies and concerns in contemporary medicine and society. We chose the series title “Conversations in Medicine and Society” decidedly because, as Professor Harold Shapiro, the president emeritus of both Princeton University and the University of Michigan, has often noted, “the term ‘conversation’ implies that everyone comes to the table with an open mind.” Our aim in selecting, editing, and publishing the books in this series, then, is not just to present facts or prescribe opinions but to explore difficult problems, to generate informed dialogue, and ultimately to shape health policy.

The books already published in the series as well as those currently in press represent a dynamic combination of historical, ethical, sociological, literary, and clinical analyses that will appeal to a broad audience of health

xii care providers, policy-makers, biomedical scientists, general scholars, and the lay public. These books share a sophistication, accessibility, and balanced perspective in addressing and discussing issues that touch everyone who interacts with the universe of medicine and health. Underpinning this approach is a crucial foundation important to the Center for the History of Medicine and the Press at the University of Michigan: the role of a public university is not only to educate students within its walls or facilitate debate among academicians. It must also enlighten the public at large and provide guideposts for navigating the institutions and ideas that comprise our world and influence our health and well-being.

Consequently, our decision to include Dr. Jerome Lowenstein's elegant and lyrical book, *The Midnight Meal*, was an easy decision to make. Dr. Lowenstein, professor of internal medicine at New York University and attending physician at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, is an accomplished and caring clinician, teacher, physician, and author. He has taught medical humanities to medical students and residents for more than three decades. One result of this brilliant career is the collection of essays you are about to read—a suite of lovely and insightful pieces on doctoring that, most assuredly, have been road tested on several generations of young doctors-to-be.

Insisting on the critical importance of the constant struggle to understand and reevaluate what it means to be human, the experience of illness, and the role of the physician in alleviating suffering as well as facilitating cures, Dr. Lowenstein represents the doctor we would all like to meet, consult, and, for those who are doctors themselves, learn from. But whether you are a doctor or a patient, or both, we all have much to gain from his experiences. Thankfully, with the reissue of this wonderful book, his wisdom is now accessible to those of us who have not had the privilege of walking the wards of Bellevue with him or seeing him in his clinic.

At first glance, the title *The Midnight Meal* might seem a bit curious to anyone who did not train in medicine before the 1980s. Long ago, at most hospitals, it was customary for the cafeteria to put out a nightly spread of bread, cold cuts, cheese, soda, and, depending on the fiscal status of the hospital, perhaps an even more elaborate meal at midnight for

all the interns and residents who were “in house and on call” and would be attending to patients until the following morning. But this midnight meal was much more than a convenience in fast food. Instead, young physicians, many of whom might not communicate with each other during the day because they worked on different services—from the children’s ward, the adult ward, maternity, emergency, and operating rooms to the radiology clinics—were forced together at the same time in the same room in the quest of sustenance not only for the body but also for the mind and soul.

Hence, midnight meals represented the opportunity for doctors to have “conversations,” if you will, about patient care, medical science, the travails of being an overworked and underpaid young doctor, and, as usually happens when active minds congregate, just about any topic under the sun. Sadly, such conversations are now a rare occurrence for medical residents and interns who are pressured and tested by high patient turnover and financial constraints and often splintered by super-specialization in graduate medical training. Rather than prompting nostalgia for the golden days, *The Midnight Meal* encourages us to reflect on how tomorrow’s doctors, and indeed the entire medical profession and health care in America, benefit from the cultivation of a sense of community. It is for today’s physicians to decide how to keep this flame lit in the twenty-first century.

Whether you are a health care professional, someone under the care of one, or a person interested in the many connections of medicine, society, and humanity, you are in for a rare literary treat. We are delighted to have played a small role in ensuring that Dr. Lowenstein’s message can be delivered to you in this newly revised version of his 1997 classic text, *The Midnight Meal*. Some revisions, including two new essays, have been added to accommodate a new century of American medicine. But the most important ingredient of *The Midnight Meal* has remained unchanged: the warm, gentle, and caring wisdom of a physician who is as gifted in his ability to manipulate a pen as his facility with a stethoscope.