**NEW BOOKS, BRIEFLY NOTED   
WHEN ILLNESS GOES PUBLIC: CELEBRITY PATIENTS AND HOW WE LOOK AT MEDICINE**

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By: Barron H. Lerner. Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, Copyright 2006

Barron Lerner, an internist, is a Professor of Medicine and Public Health at Columbia University in New York. His previous book, The Breast Cancer Wars, was the winner of the 2006 William H. Welch Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine. Lerner’s latest offering, When Illness Goes Public, tackles the issue of celebrity illness and how it impacts medical care and the public’s alleged “right to know”.

Lerner frames his book with brief vignettes, at the beginning and at the end, of Lance Armstrong, multiple winner of the Tour de France and survivor of testicular cancer.

Lerner focuses on a dozen cases and, with each one, traces the state of knowledge regarding diagnosis and treatment of a particular disease, how the celebrity’s illness impacted the public perception of that disease, patient privacy and press coverage, fan letters, and the state of medical technology. Individual chapters address the following famous cases:

* New York Yankee’s first baseman Lou Gehrig, his death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and the Gary Cooper movie Pride of the Yankees
* Baseball player Jimmy Piersall’s experience with bipolar disease and the Hollywood movie about the case, Fear Strikes Out
* LIFE magazine photographer Margaret Bourke-White (remember her famous picture of Gandhi?) and her medical and surgical treatment for Parkinson’s disease
* United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ death, while in office, of colorectal cancer
* Professional football player Brian Piccolo’s battle with malignant germ cell tumor, and the made-for-TV movie Brian’s Song
* Civil rights lawyer and college President Morris Abram’s treatment for acute myelocytic leukemia
* Hollywood leading man Steve McQueen’s treatment with conventional and unconventional therapy for mesothelioma
* Hollywood leading woman Rita Hayworth and her diagnosis and treatment for Alzheimer’s disease in the context of heavy alcohol use
* Dentist Barney Clark’s very public treatment for congestive heart failure with an extracorporeal mechanical heart in Utah
* The strange death of Libby Zion in a New York hospital and how it came to produce the 80 hour work week for interns and residents in the United States
* Tennis star Arthur Ashe and Hollywood leading man Paul Glaser’s wife Elizabeth’s treatment for AIDS
* The real story of Lorenzo Odone’s treatment for adrenal leukodystrophy and the movie Lorenzo’s Oil

Lerner is meticulous in distinguishing truth from fiction and offering a dispassionate historical perspective on what really happened, what the public was told happened, and how celebrities and the press manipulated stories. Many of these celebrity cases bring to mind the wise saying of a medical historian: “There are three aspects to an event: occurrence of the event, the way the event imprints itself upon your mind, and the way you reprocess the event before you retell it to someone else. By the time a second party hears about it, an enormous amount of filtering has already occurred.”

For radiation oncologists, the stories of Dulles’ treatment for colorectal cancer, Piccolo’s battle with germ cell tumor, the highly assertive patient Morris Abram and his treatment for AML, and Steve McQueen’s treatment for mesothelioma will particularly resonate. The public is attracted to cults of celebrity and our understanding of disease and its treatment is often filtered through these very public lives.

Lerner’s book can be read with profit, particularly as U.S. radiation oncologists prepare to deal with the fall out of the diagnosis and treatment of Senator Edward Kennedy for a malignant supratentorial glioma.