New Books, Briefly Noted  
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by Conrad Fischer and Caterina Oneto  

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When I was a resident-in-training in radiation oncology in the early 1980s at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, one of my attending physicians was the occasionally curmudgeonly C.C. Wang. He did not seem to be particularly impressed by my interest in medical ethics. "Medical ethics is not that complicated," he once told me. "It is just common sense."  

I knew, at the time, he was wrong. When I was young I thought that the problem was to make sense out of ethical problems. Of Dr. Wang's two words, common and sense, I was focused on the second word. It took me over thirty years to understand precisely why my emphasis was wrong and why Dr. Wang was wrong. What I have come to believe is that the problems that we face in medical ethics are not that we cannot come up with conclusions that make sense, it is that we do not have enough social values we hold in common.  

A few years ago I taught a required second year medical school class in medical ethics. During the course I was visited by the elected class representative. "My fellow students and I are having trouble with your course," the gentleman said. "As medical students we are accustomed to going to lectures, taking notes, and then taking multiple-choice examinations where we provide the one best answer. You keep talking about ethics problems and saying 'On the one hand' and then 'On the other hand'. You don't tell us the right answer. You keep asking us to think about problems. We're medical students. We don't do think."  

The latest edition of Drs. Fischer and Oneto's book, Medical Ethics for the Boards, solves the problem of what are common values by bluntly telling you what the author's of board examination questions say they are. The book also won't force you to think much. The authors are not concerned with in-depth treatment and nuanced discussions of ethical problems in medicine. What they are concerned with is telling you "the right answer to pass the boards". If you are going to be required to answer multiple-choice questions in medical ethics to pass a standardized test in the United States as either part of the USMLE or for a board-certification examination in a medical speciality, this paperback will tell you what the problem is, what "the right answer" is, and then give you a series of sample multiple choice questions to drill you. There is no topic in biomedical ethics that Drs. Fischer and Oneto can't address in a few paragraphs. Whether the topic is autonomy, informed consent, end-of-life issues, reproductive medicine, organ and tissue donation, HIV, sexually transmitted disease, malpractice, or human experimentation you'll get told what the issue is and that the consensus right answer is within 180 seconds of when you start reading. Then the authors announce "Next up!" and we're on to the next topic.  

If you are looking for a fast food serving of medical ethics that is concise and where almost everything is black-and-white, this book is for you.