



***The Last Leaf Has Fallen*
by J. Willis Hurst**

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Reviewed by F. David Winter Jr., MD, MSc, FACP

Dr. J. Willis Hurst is a noted cardiologist, teacher, researcher, and scientific writer (1). He has also dabbled in fictional writing. In this book he weaves a fictional story of

an unscrupulous pharmaceutical company and the fate of a misled physician with a thinly veiled true story of devotion to his deceased wife, his career at a university hospital, and his later life at a retirement community.

There are important messages in this book. Students of medicine will recognize the emphasis on “the skill of thinking, which is different from the simple memorization of material.” Dr. Hurst draws upon his experience as a teacher to explore and discuss the essence of problem solving, teaching, and learning. He has been labeled a “true teacher.” True teachers are said to have insatiable curiosity, longstanding study habits, a fondness for topics that they teach, and affection for *those* that they teach (1).

Practical advice is given on how to optimize the presentation of medical cases and on the proper format for a patient’s problem list. “A poor problem list usually means that the remainder of the record is poor.” There is also an attempt to define the profession of medicine, which he acknowledges is difficult to concisely describe.

Managed care issues are discussed. Externally induced time constraints impacting the care of patients are criticized. Advice to younger physicians in the book recurrently stresses taking time to understand and empathize with the patient’s concerns. National health care issues are also addressed. He has a young medical student plead the case for universal health care in America. The advantages of a single-payer system are discussed, and Medicare is favored as the administrator.

By far the most passionate message is for the medical profession to avoid “the gentle persuasion of sophisticated hype.” Involvement by the pharmaceutical industry in education and in “corrupted” research is demonized. A fictional newspaper headline proves prophetic to the story plot: “Another pharmaceutical house has been caught withholding information about the toxic effects of their latest ‘miracle drug.’”

Relations between pharmaceutical representatives and physicians are attacked. This is a popular, topical topic (2–4). Published articles often conclude with thoughts such as “Physicians who

spend time with pharmaceutical representatives are less likely to prescribe rationally” and “Physicians who talk to drug reps typically underestimate the influence that they receive, influence that can be demonstrated by studies of their prescribing habits.”

The American Medical Association formulated guidelines for interactions between pharmaceutical representatives and physicians in 2001. They allow for “modest” gifts but caution that “the physician must avoid even the perception that their medical judgment can be compromised” (5). The American College of Physicians was more proscriptive in 2006: “The acceptance by a physician of individual gifts, hospitality, trips, and subsidies of all types that might diminish or appear to others to diminish the objectivity of their professional judgment is strongly discouraged” (6). In keeping with this concept, the lead character in the book, when confronted by a drug rep regarding a new medication, responds, “See me in 5 years. By then, we will know if the drug is as useful as it seems to be now. Also, serious and unwanted side effects may be noted by then.”

The title of the book lends an appropriate metaphor to the plot. It refers to the tree under which Aristotle taught medicine 460 years before the birth of Christ. The “last leaf” represents a medical student who “falls from the tree of knowledge.” In the final chapter, young houseofficers—interns and residents—provide optimism that the tree may flourish again. They appear to have learned the teachings: “Knowing medicine does not automatically make you a doctor. The best doctors always place the patient’s comfort and well-being before their own. They care deeply for the welfare of the patient.”

This book is dedicated by the author to his wife of 62 years and to the thousands of students whom he has influenced. Dr. Hurst is a revered and respected teacher of medicine and cardiology who has been likened to William Osler and Paul Dudley White. Those familiar with the author will recognize his leanings. Those unfamiliar will come to appreciate the principles of this great leader.

1. Silverman ME, Fye WB. *J. Willis Hurst: His Life and Teachings*. Mahwah, NJ: Foundations for Advances in Medicine and Science, 2007 (206 pp).
2. Higgins SP. Drug representatives: giving you lunch or stealing your soul? *Dermatol Online J* 2007;13(4):5.
3. Brody H. The company we keep: why physicians should refuse to see pharmaceutical representatives. *Ann Fam Med* 2005;3(1):82–85.
4. Ziegler MG, Lew P, Singer BC. The accuracy of drug information from pharmaceutical sales representatives. *JAMA* 1995;273(16):1296–1298.
5. American Medical Association. Ethical guidelines for gifts to physicians from industry. Available at www.ama-assn.org; accessed May 5, 2008.
6. American College of Physicians. Get drug smart: Things to consider in physician interactions with pharmaceutical companies. November 2006. Available at www.acponline.org; accessed May 5, 2008.

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