

BOOKS

**Caring for Cynthia: A Caregiver's Journey Through Breast Cancer.** Amy Blackburn. San Rafael, CA: Verve Editions, 2008, 96 pages, hardcover, \$24.95.



This photographic essay illuminates private moments of the breast cancer experience from the caregiver's perspective. Intended readers are "those who provide care

and support for others." Blackburn is an emergency room RN who also is a photographer. Cynthia, the patient and Blackburn's best friend, is an internal medicine physician, 41 years old at diagnosis. Blackburn artistically and poignantly describes the breast cancer experience through personal narrations and photographs, beginning on the day of Cynthia's diagnosis through surgery (bilateral mastectomies) to the completion of chemotherapy. For some, the photographs may be difficult reminders of the breast cancer experience, and others may be disturbed by the raw emotion they express. However, Blackburn's book leaves readers with a message of hope, courage, and love.

Cynthia received her diagnosis over the phone, which often catches patients when they are alone and unprepared. Cynthia and Blackburn's foresight to capture the call and other personal moments is a gift to those who need to know that they are not alone in the disease experience. The cognitive and emotional challenges following diagnosis when preparations and decisions are made about surgery are described well. Those who have waited in medical care settings, whether for personal evaluations or those of loved ones, may relate to Blackburn's photograph of the waiting room ceiling at the cancer center, which captures the anxiety felt as one waits, often without words, and studies the surrounding space.

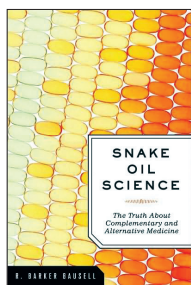
Two points need to be clarified. Cynthia received an injection of radioactive dye on the day of surgery to determine whether the cancer had spread via the lymph nodes to other parts of the body. If this was lymphatic mapping prior to sentinel lymph node biopsy, the procedure does

not identify the spread of disease, only the first draining lymph nodes that might be more likely to contain cancer cells. The concept is difficult for newly diagnosed patients to comprehend, and the description does not clarify the issue, although the nature of the test is unclear. Cynthia also had restricted upper-arm mobility after surgery, as would be expected, and she received therapy to correct the issue. However, the statement that physical therapy is not offered is neither a universal experience nor quality cancer care. Although some surgeons do not refer patients for postoperative physical or occupational therapy routinely, many settings include a preoperative evaluation to ensure an appropriate postoperative care plan.

Two of Blackburn's struggles stand out: being a nurse in the presence of family or friends with a life-threatening illness, and being a caregiver when the caregiver needs caregiving. As Blackburn describes, caregivers often would like someone to be their caregiver. Caregiving, despite its many joys, can be lonely and conflicted. Stories help us heal, and Blackburn's revealing and meaningful essay stands out in its message of community, relationships, and caring.

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**Snake Oil Science: The Truth About Complementary and Alternative Medicine.** R. Barker Bausell. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 352 pages, hardcover, \$24.95.



The American Heritage Dictionary defines snake oil as "a worthless preparation fraudulently peddled as a cure for many ills." With the book's title, *Snake Oil Science* leaves little doubt as to what the answer will be to its primary question: "Is any complementary and alternative medical therapy more effective than a placebo?"

In 2009, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) celebrates its 10th anniversary.

The funding and conduct of NIH-level research in the area of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) are a recent trend. Even as societal support for CAM research increases and additional major medical centers incorporate CAM therapies to meet increasing consumer demand, Bausell argues in *Snake Oil Science* that the trend is misguided and should be stopped in its tracks. Bausell, a biostatistician, research methodologist, and self-described "empirical philosopher," claims the only credible tool available to ascertain the truth about CAM is the placebo-controlled, large, randomized clinical trial. Bausell shows that only a small proportion of CAM research meets or comes close to meeting that standard. However, surprisingly, he believes that enough evidence exists to dismiss the scientific credibility of almost all forms of CAM. The argument is clear, and the narrative highly readable. Self-deprecating humor and witty comments aimed at debunking CAM scientists and practitioners lighten the tone of the text. After systematically discussing the CAM movement, the importance of rigor in research design, and the likely mechanisms of the placebo effect as well as reviewing CAM research literature, Bausell succinctly concludes that "CAM therapies are nothing more than cleverly packaged placebos."

Bausell admits that many conventional medical procedures are not backed by the kind of scientific evidence he believes CAM researchers must produce to be credible. Although he recognizes the idea that CAM therapies need not be "constrained" by the scientific paradigm, this kind of constraint, appealing to the most rigorous standards of empiricism and reductionism, clearly is the book's intent. Bausell's point of view never appears to be moderated by medical pluralism or cultural contextualism, concepts frequently given some degree of credence in scholarly discussions of CAM. An anthropologic perspective is introduced to explain how CAM science is given "a huge credibility boost" among the public by simply having NCCAM at the NIH. In contrast, little indication exists of anthropologic perspectives being applied to understanding non-Western systems of medicine or self-care. Bausell shows the extent of his scientific reductionism, stating, "Yoga's mechanism of action could be subsumed under those