

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Dr. Hippo Will See You Now

Dr. Charlotte Cowan was practicing at Boston's MassGeneral Hospital for Children in 2000 when she approached the chairman of pediatrics about her aspiration to write stories for sick children in an illustrated picture book format.

On the spot, he offered her a sabbatical to pursue her goal.

"That was a real gift," recalled Dr. Cowan, a pediatrician who majored in English as an undergraduate at Princeton (N.J.) University.

"Otherwise, I'm not sure I would have had the courage to leave my job cold turkey to embark on this adventure."

The next year she left her pediatric practice to

write and publish full-color picture books intended for readers aged 2-7 years. Collectively known as the Dr. Hippo series, her first five books address acute infectious illnesses and are written with the mission of entertaining, educating, and comforting both parents and children (www.drhippo.com).

The notion of writing children's books first came during her residency training. One night, several children under 4 years of age came into the emergency department with acute asthmatic exacerbations. "They needed nebulizers and were frightened by the mask," Dr. Cowan said. "I remember thinking 'there must be a better way to do this. There must be a way to educate these kids in a child-friendly way that would dissipate their anxiety and make them feel more comfortable while they're waiting to be seen.'"

Later, while in practice, Dr. Cowan "felt again that children—young children especially—are often frightened by, and confused about, the illnesses that affect them," she said. "Parental anxiety compounds the problem. Practicing pediatrics—in addition to diagnosing and treating illness—requires attention to the

emotional needs of the family. Warmth and empathy matter."

Each book in the Dr. Hippo series has a child-friendly plot, follows an illness from first symptom through resolution, and contains information and reassurance for the sick child.

The first book of the series, "The Little Elephant With the Big Earache" (Concord, Mass.: Hippocratic Press, 2004), recounts the story of Eddie, a young elephant who awakens in the middle of the night with an earache after an afternoon of playing with his cousins who are visiting for his upcoming birthday party. The next morning, Eddie's mom takes him to see Dr. Hippocrates, a friendly

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DR. COWAN

hippopotamus drawn from Dr. Cowan's own experience as a pediatrician and mother of three. Dr. Hippo takes a wait and see approach without prescribing antibiotics for Eddie's mild case of otitis media, and Eddie recovers in time to enjoy his birthday party.

The other titles in the series are also about animals inflicted with infectious diseases, and Dr. Cowan chose each character for a specific reason. The giraffe with a sore throat ("Sadie's Sore Throat") "obviously has an enormous problem," she said. A frog with a fever ("Peeper Has a Fever") showcases an animal that loves to swim, "and bathing is an important part of fever care." A polar bear with a cold ("Katie Caught a Cold") "conveys how shivery children feel when sneezing and miserable with a cold." The most recent book, "The Moose with Loose Poops," had an "irresistible rhyme necessary to offset the disagreeable subject of gastroenteritis."

Each book includes a separate guide for parents answering questions they may have, such as how to know what is wrong, how to comfort and care for a sick child at home, and when to call the physician for help.

Dr. Cowan, who resides in Eastern Massachusetts, said that she has not taken formal courses in writing short stories, "but I have read a great many of them. The need to create characters, develop a plot, and convey medical education in 900 words or less was extremely challenging. The creative process is unusual in that, when you sit down to write, you don't always know where you're going to end up."

She credits her mother for inspiring her interest in books.

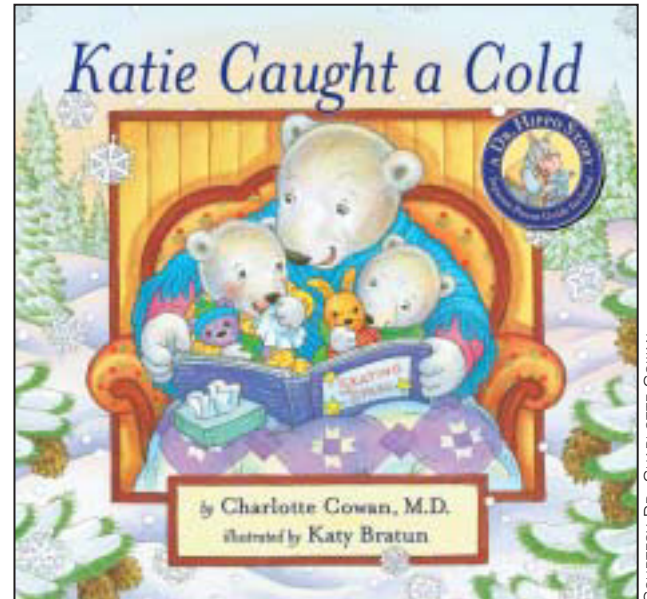
Incensed that the elementary school her daughter attended had no library, her mother founded a library at the school and ran it for 25 years. "It was in the school's cellar, next to the furnace," Dr. Cowan said. "But it fulfilled my mother's dream and offered a place where children could fall in love with books."

The Dr. Hippo series currently is being translated into Japanese, and Dr. Cowan intends to follow this with a Spanish translation. "One of the goals of my work is to increase the accessibility and affordability of health education," she said. "Translating into Spanish would offer the education inherent in these books to a population that is considered vulnerable."

The next book planned for the series is about obesity, the first in a number of titles that will address chronic illnesses.

Ten states have used the "The Little Elephant With the Big Earache" in antibiotic awareness outreach campaigns, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention invited the Hippocratic Press to be part of its 2009 "Get Smart About Antibiotics" campaign.

Dr. Cowan's efforts to improve health care education and access have not gone



Each book in the series helps reassure sick children by following an illness from first symptom to resolution.

unnoticed. In the spring of 2009, the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation selected Dr. Cowan as a leading social innovator. The designation was marked by an invitation to the White House on June 30, where she and other recipients from around the country were addressed by President Barack Obama in the East Wing.

"We were ushered into a room where there were 100 seats set up and President Obama spoke to us for about 20 minutes," she said. "It was phenomenal to hear him speak in such a small setting. It was a great honor and a huge incentive to keep writing." ■

By Doug Brunk

E-MAIL US YOUR STORIES

The purpose of "The Rest of Your Life" is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.

U.S. Lags Behind Others in Medical Home, IT Adoption

BY JANE ANDERSON

The United States lags behind other countries in terms of adoption of health information technology, providing financial incentives for quality, and improving overall access to care, according to findings from a survey of primary care physicians in 11 countries.

These deficits in primary care, health information technology (HIT), and access have led to lesser quality of care in the United States in several areas compared with other countries, Commonwealth Fund President Karen Davis, Ph.D., said during a teleconference in an-

nouncing the results of her organization's International Health Policy Survey.

The survey, results of which were published online in the journal *Health Affairs* (2009;28:w1171-83), found that 58% of U.S. primary care physicians said their patients often have difficulty paying for medications and care, compared with 5%-37% of patients in the other countries studied.

In addition, 71% of U.S. physicians reported that their practices do not have provisions for after-hours care, forcing patients to seek care in emergency departments, the survey showed. Of the other countries studied, at least half of physicians in all but two countries (Nor-

way and Canada) said they have provisions for after-hours care.

U.S. physicians also were far less likely than their international peers to use HIT—only 46% of U.S. doctors use electronic medical records, compared with 99% of physicians in the Netherlands and 97% of physicians in New Zealand and Norway, the survey showed.

Meanwhile, other countries are jumping ahead in implementing the patient-centered medical home approach, she said. "The concept ... originated in the United States, but we found that such efforts are spreading faster in other countries," Ms. Schoen said.

For example, all but two other countries provide a greater percentage of physicians with financial incentives for providing needed chronic or preventive care services or implementing other aspects of the medical home model, the survey showed.

For the study, Commonwealth Fund authors surveyed more than 10,000 primary care physicians in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Data were collected from February through July 2009. ■