Diabetes: The Biography

By Robert Tattersall


There is an epidemic of diabetes that is well-established in developed countries and is making its way rapidly into developing countries as well. This epidemic is drawing an ever broader array of people from all walks of life into diabetes-related careers. In his “biography” of the disease, part of a new series from Oxford University Press, Tattersall provides a complete yet very readable history that should be of interest to newcomers as well as experienced experts in the field.

Tattersall is a retired diabetes clinician and researcher and admitted medical history buff. He tells the story of diabetes as it unfolded over time, starting with the earliest known references to “the pissing evil” and ending with the diabetes epidemic that is sweeping the world today. In between, he does an outstanding job of conveying the increasing knowledge of medical and social aspects of the disease as our understanding of them has evolved. He lets the reader see (perhaps recall for the more senior among us) how far we have come in our knowledge of diabetes and how far we still have to go. His storyline and vignettes highlight virtually all of the major discoveries in the field, giving readers an inside look at how individuals shaped the field and, just as importantly, how discoveries were made.

The book is extensively researched, but written as a story rather than a compendium of facts. It readily conveys images of such key figures as Banting, Best, and McCleod as they discovered insulin and Joslin as he created new approaches to clinical care from careful observations of his patients. The book is mostly text, with sparse figures. Nonetheless, it is a fast read due to the friendly and simple style of writing. The author and his editors are to be commended for producing a text that can be understood by experts and laypeople alike.

If you are just beginning a career in diabetes research or care, this book will provide you with the important backstory of the major advances in the field that have preceded you. If you are already well-established in the field, the book will consolidate memories and clarify facts surrounding the “urban legends” that abound in diabetes circles. And if you are simply someone who likes a good story about how the present came to be, the book will provide you with a good read about one of the most important human afflictions today and for the foreseeable future. If you place yourself in one of these groups, I strongly recommend the book to you.

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Thomas A. Buchanan (e-mail: buchanan@usc.edu)
Division of Endocrinology and Diabetes, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90033

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