MEDIA REVIEWS

Big Squeeze: A Social and Political History of the Controversial Mammogram
Handel Reynolds, MD

“Mammography can detect cancer as small as the period at the end of this sentence.”

Many people may remember this succinct and compelling phrase that was posted in advertisements on billboards and bus stops in major urban areas during the height of the breast cancer activist movement of the late 1980s to early 1990s. But the public may be less aware of the fact that, since the first inception of screening mammography more than 40 years ago, the question of whether all women under 50 should be screened has been a major point of contention in the medical community.

In his book The Big Squeeze: A Social and Political History of the Controversial Mammogram, Dr Handel Reynolds explores the origins of this controversy and how certain key social and political developments would set mammography on a “trajectory that would eventually make it the second most commonly performed cancer screening test” and spawn a multibillion-dollar industry in the process.

Reynolds, who was a practicing radiologist before his death in 2013, begins the book by discussing the first (and, to date, only) randomized, controlled trial in 1963 that demonstrated the benefits of screening mammography for women ages 50 to 59. But when mammography was later introduced to the public at large in the early 1970s (when the fight for women’s civil liberties and reproductive freedoms came to the forefront of public consciousness), women’s groups, medical advocacy organizations, and policymakers framed the issue of mammography access—even for women as young as 35—as a fundamental women’s health issue. Since then, whenever medical experts (such as the United States Preventative Services Task Force panel in 2009) have advised against the practice of screening women under 50, the backlash has been swift and robust.

With yet another US election just on the horizon, during which health care access policies will inevitably be hotly debated, the story of mammography as presented in The Big Squeeze is the perfect case study on how strong science can quickly and easily be usurped by political expediency and cultural zeitgeist. The book’s only obvious shortcoming is that it only briefly mentions genetic testing for breast cancer–related mutations; if the book had been written several years later, perhaps Reynolds would have included a passage about the Angelina Jolie Effect (https://hms.harvard.edu/news/angelina-jolie-effect).

The Big Squeeze should certainly be of interest to health care professionals and public policymakers, but because it is also succinct and accessible enough for a layperson audience, women who are on the fence about mammography would benefit from reading it as well.

Reviewer: Stefanie Howard, MA
Stefanie is a freelance medical editor and writer living in Stirling, NJ.

* * *

The 21st Century Guide to Writing Articles in the Biomedical Sciences
Shiri Diskin, PhD

For many beginning students in the health sciences, there seems to be an unspoken expectation that they undertake research. Although many students find a kind and patient mentor who is able to shepherd them methodically through the research and writing process, gradually giving them more responsibility, the majority inevitably find themselves in a situation in which they haphazardly slap together a small project or find a way to tack themselves onto a paper, all in the hopes of getting published or fulfilling a requirement of their program. Dr Shiri Diskin, a molecular biologist who has worked for more than 15 years in the medical writing profession as a writer, editor, and reviewer of scientific journal articles, books, and regulatory documents, has written a book targeted toward beginning medical writers. More experienced readers of the AMWA Journal will find The 21st Century Guide to Writing Articles in the Biomedical Sciences useful as an update covering current conventions and online tools useful to many subtypes of medical writing.

The Guide includes 9 chapters, each covering major topics on aspects of preparing, carrying out, and completing a publication based on a research project. The first chapter, “Before You Write,” describes how a would-be researcher needs to set up the right habits, such as reading in the chosen field and understanding basic research ethics, even before putting pen to paper. The second chapter, “Choosing Your Target Journal,” provides useful advice on how authors can select a journal that they feel would best be a home for their work and how to adapt their writing to the journal’s specific rules.

continued on page 85