

Sleep Disorders for Dummies

by Max Hirshkowitz and Patricia B. Smith, 355 pp, with index, \$19.99, ISBN 0-7645-3901-9, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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Those of us who have used the self-help guide, 'PC for Dummies,' may be surprised to learn that similar help is now available for such non-digital challenges as Golf, Feng Shui, and various medical disorders including Diabetes, High Blood Pressure, Fibromyalgia and Thyroid. The books feature simple language, short paragraphs, checklists, and frequent sub-headings and icons to assist the reader with limited time or interest.

'Sleep Disorders ..' is dedicated to the sleepless, i.e. the reader who seeks help for ineffective sleep, and it largely succeeds. The book's scope is broad, encompassing the full range of sleep complaints and all categories of sleep disorders. The emphasis on sleep behaviors as the basis for many sleep problems is appropriate for the majority of likely readers. Physicians may be surprised at the relatively lesser emphasis on important medical problems. For example the chapter on obstructive sleep apnea devotes 16 of 26 pages to uncomplicated snoring, has little to say about cardiovascular complications of OSA, and offers no advice on how to succeed with CPAP. Readers are appropriately directed to medical help for more serious disorders. The description of what to expect in a sleep laboratory is particularly helpful. Advice is provided on virtually every page. Consistent with the focus on self help, much advice falls in the categories of common sense, sleep nostrums and popular lore. The style is encouraging (you are not alone) and supportive (I feel your pain) and contemporary (lists of top ten tips).

'Sleep Disorders ..' joins a considerable lay literature advocating attention to sleep for a better life. A common failing of this paradigm, and 'Sleep Disorders ..' is no exception, is a tendency to exaggerate, to stretch the truth by allusion and frank misstatement. For example, I object to the claim that poor sleep may cause increased mortality. Even when qualified with the ubiquitous *may*, the association with every day insomnia or fatigue is junk science at best and certainly a kind of puffery that most professionals would avoid. Ditto for poor sleep and infections.

Breathing problems are invariably associated with a lack of oxygen, which is conceptually simplistic and sometimes (e.g. yawning) plain wrong; and so on. When it comes to treatment suggestions, the book includes remedies that have no basis in clinical science or routine medical practice. For example, does clutter in the bedroom promote insomnia? Does a jet lag visor really help anyone other than the manufacturer? Does drinking lots of water correct snoring, a problem that anti-histamines are said to promote by virtue of their 'drying effect?'

Of course a self-help book for non-professionals does not need to observe the restraints of scientific evidence, and 'Sleep Disorders ..' certainly does not. My problem is that the distinction between sleep *medicine* and non-scientific information is missing in this book. The holistic and unorthodox approach to sleep disorders presented here is quite different from the majority vision of sleep specialists that attempt to base clinical practice on scientific evidence and wish to place their specialty in mainstream medicine. Thus this reader is not likely to use this book in his clinical practice. For the uninitiated reader, however, who seeks an introduction to the world of sleep, 'Sleep Disorders ..' will provide lots of information along with comfort and reassurance. And no one can disagree with the basic message that poor sleep does not have to be and that help is available.

Disclosure Statement

Dr. Schmidt-Nowara has indicated no financial conflict of interest.

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