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Life in the Balance: Emergency Medicine and the Quest to Reverse Sudden Death

Mickey Eisenberg

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Sudden deaths are perhaps the hardest to accept. The heart attack that strikes without warning; the accident that takes away a loved one in the prime of life. But now, for the first time in human history, we have the ability to reverse sudden death. In communities and emergency rooms around the country, men, women, and children who almost certainly would have died 100 or even 50 years ago today survive thanks to the miracle of cardiac resuscitation. But while television shows such as *ER*. or *Rescue 911* have made even the direst medical emergencies seem all too familiar--the wailing sirens, the arrival of paramedics, the initiation of CPR--few of us know of the decades and centuries of effort behind every successful resuscitation.
Life in the Balance is the riveting story of the ongoing quest to reverse sudden death. Written by Mickey S. Eisenberg, M.D., Director of Emergency Medicine Service at the University of Washington Medical Center, it is infused with a dedicated doctors passion for saving lives. Eschewing medical jargon, Eisenberg takes us on a fascinating journey of discovery that ranges from biblical times to a real life, minute-by-minute resuscitation in suburban King County, Washington. The journey begins with a grief-stricken mother who brings her lifeless child before the prophet Elijah, and continues with, among others, a physician to gladiators, a Danish masseur, a Baltimore fire chief, smooth-talking medical quacks, and a crusty cardiologist. This wildly improbable but true tale includes magnets, bellows, rectal tobacco smoke, frog legs, executed criminals, bells attached to coffins, reanimation chairs, a long car ride from Kansas City to Baltimore, a serendipitous dog experiment, and a one-story hospital in Belfast. Eisenberg recreates the thrilling breakthroughs in our understanding of respiration, circulation, defibrillation, and the need for mobile emergency medical services, and confronts the limits of modern medicine. He reveals that just as critical as the ability to resuscitate is the *will* to resuscitate--inconceivable before the Enlightenment, when reversing sudden death would have been viewed as tampering with divine will, and still a source of painful dilemmas today in cases of brain damage or serious illness.
A first-class medical detective story, *Life in the Balance* is supplemented with a straightforward, easy-to-use guide to emergency CPR, a handy glossary of relevant medical terms, and a potentially life-saving Community Survival Checklist. It is must reading not only for health care and emergency medicine practitioners, but for everyone whose life has been touched by the modern-day miracle of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

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