

Comfort Always

Alan R. Cohen

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In *Comfort Always*, Dr. Alan Cohen offers a deeply personal and engaging account of a life in pediatric neurosurgery. At a time when many surgical narratives emphasize technical mastery, Cohen reminds us—quietly but powerfully—that the heart of our profession lies in something more enduring: compassion, humility, and human connection. According to Cohen, the book was written after hours and often late at night as a labor of love over the course of 18 months. Cohen, now at Johns Hopkins, has devoted much of his career to the care of children with brain tumors. His clinical excellence is evident throughout, but what stands out most is the way he cares for patients and families—with warmth, humor, and genuine compassion. Those who know “Big Al” will recognize his voice immediately.

The book is written in the first person and reflects influences that shaped his path, from the fictional TV neurosurgical personage, Dr. Ben Casey, to his father, a highly respected ophthalmic surgeon. His training at Harvard, Cornell, and New York University where he was mentored by neurosurgeon Dr. Joe Ransohoff provides the impetus for the book; however, Cohen underscores the importance of essential human traits—kindness, empathy, optimism, hope and humour—for the success he has achieved and enjoyed as a pediatric neurosurgeon. Structured as 18 case-based chapters, each framed by themes such as humility, grit, and resilience, the book reads as a series of clinical vignettes spanning his career. Each chapter is introduced with a carefully selected, pithy quotation that foreshadows one or more of the lessons learned by Cohen from each of his patients. My favorite, from the chapter on the importance of being humble as a neurosurgeon, is the apt quote by Yogi Berra,



“It ain’t the heat, it’s the humility.” As Cohen notes—and as all neurosurgeons appreciate—humility is a constant companion in our field.

I was struck by the richness of detail in Cohen’s storytelling: not only the medical nuances, but also the lives surrounding each child—the parents, their occupations, their hopes, and their fears. Cohen should be acknowledged and congratulated for recognizing the seminal roles played by neurosurgery residents and fellows, always mentioning them by name, who assisted him in the operating room in many of the demanding cases described, a gesture that feels both genuine and long overdue. The book also provides wonderful moments in the history of medicine, even for seasoned readers, with references to and insights into the conditions we as neurosurgeons frequently face, such as Gerstmann syn-

drome, von Hippel–Lindau disease, and Bourneville’s disease. At the same time, Cohen succeeds in explaining complex neurosurgical techniques—neuronavigation, neuroendoscopy, and intraoperative neuromonitoring—in a way that remains accessible to a broader audience.

Humor weaves naturally throughout the book, which comes as no surprise for those of us who know the author. Whether exchanging corny jokes with a child facing surgery or recounting lighter moments in the operating room, Cohen demonstrates how levity can coexist with seriousness in meaningful ways. As one example, after operating on Liam (Chapter 18, “Humility”), a child with a large rolandic ZFTA-fusion positive supratentorial ependymoma, Cohen and his team placed a colorful turban bandage around Liam’s head postoperatively, as is his custom. In addition, they fashioned an identical one for Liam’s precious stuffed animal monkey which had been taken to

the operating room and lay beside Liam as he awakened. These moments feel authentic and underscore the trust and rapport he builds with his patients, and their families.

If there is a contextual observation to make, it is that many of the cases presented involve patients whose lesions were formidable, but whose outcomes were favorable following surgery. In daily pediatric neurosurgical practice, as Cohen stresses, we also confront diagnoses where outcomes are far less certain—conditions such as diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, traumatic spinal cord injury, and nonaccidental injury. The vicissitudes in caring for children with these and other devastating neurosurgical conditions can swing even more widely than those in which favorable outcomes are achieved. Yet, even in these circumstances, Cohen's central message is unwavering—comfort always.

Comfort Always is a thoughtful, humane, and highly enjoyable book. It will resonate not only with the lay public, for whom it is intended, but also with those of us within the profession who are reminded, through Cohen's stories, of why we chose this path in our journey as pediatric neurosurgeons.

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