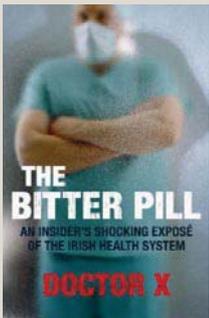


## *The Bitter Pill – An Insider’s Shocking Exposé of the Irish Health System* by Doctor “X”



Reviewed by student “Y”  
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Through anecdotes, stories, and a deep sense of frustration, Doctor X tells all in his recent book, *The Bitter Pill – An Insider’s Shocking Exposé of the Irish Health System*. As a medical student, and ardent fan of muckrakers, I walked expectantly with book in hand to the nearest Starbucks, eager to read the completed work of this popular blogger. However, my excitement and curiosity waned as I turned through the pages, unmoved by the rhetoric and accounts of personal experiences. While Doctor X does reveal important inadequacies in the Irish healthcare system – overworked junior doctors, unbalanced consultant power, medical errors, and patient waiting lists – each of these is presented through a personal conflict or experience, providing much shock value but little supporting data. However, his perspective as a non-consultant hospital doctor (NCHD) enables Doctor X to let the public empathise with the misunderstood, and challenging, life of a medical trainee in a struggling organisation.

Doctor X begins by presenting the symptoms of a broken system. He immediately identifies the consultant as antagonist, through stories of junior doctors “imprisoned in silence by fear”, and money-hungry radiologists leaving the uninsured to wait until their private patients are seen. This first chapter sets the tone for the book: junior doctors struggle from fatigue; radiology services fall behind demand; the two-tiered system emphasises profit over care; MRSA spreads through poor hygiene; and, ultimately, the patient is lost in the middle. While I agree that it is important to expose deficiencies in medical care, the descriptions throughout this book are similar to front-page tabloid headlines. Such unfounded, inflammatory sensationalism does much to destroy the already delicate and decaying fabric of the doctor–patient relationship.

One chapter I found revealing included Doctor X’s reflections on racism within the NCHD training scheme. He identifies the striking polarity of race between the mostly white consultants and racially diverse junior doctors. With several examples of non-white doctors passed up for promotion, including the uncomfortable quotation: “If

you want to progress your career, I suggest you leave this country”, the reader becomes acutely aware of the necessity for change in the way consultants are appointed and registrars selected for specialist training. In a separate chapter entitled ‘The Bedlam of Bureaucracy’, Doctor X tackles the inefficiencies in Ireland’s current system of medical documentation. He describes the chaos within patients’ clinical notes, and the time wasted in searching for results, problems that have solutions in the current era of electronic record keeping. The book concludes with a list of 29 key areas for change. Doctor X argues that change should begin with restructuring of the current two-tier system of private versus public care, complemented by increased accountability among consultants.

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*The Bitter Pill* is a work of opinion; a conveyor belt of emotional stories from disgruntled doctors in training. This book is a far cry from the work of pioneer muckraker Upton Sinclair or, more recently, Eric Schlosser. Doctor X’s stories are full of emotion, but lacking in hard evidence to support his substantial claims. This book is destined to become just another used paperback selling for 99 cents in Temple Bar Market. However, I hope at the very least that it encourages other junior doctors, and consultants, to present unbiased data to the Irish people, so that they can be better informed of the changes necessary to improve the nation’s healthcare system.