



Life without Disease: The Pursuit of Medical Utopia

William B. Schwartz

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The chaotic state of today's health care is the result of an explosion of effective medical technologies. Rising costs will continue to trouble U.S. health care in the coming decades, but new molecular strategies may eventually contain costs. As life expectancy is dramatically extended by molecular medicine, a growing population of the aged will bring new problems. In the next fifty years genetic intervention will shift the focus of medicine in the United States from repairing the ravages of disease to preventing the onset of disease. Understanding the role of genes in human health, says Dr. William B. Schwartz, is the driving force that will change the direction of medical care, and the age-old dream of life without disease may come close to realization by the middle of the next century. Medical care in 2050 will be vastly more effective, Schwartz maintains, and it may also be less expensive than the resource-intensive procedures such as coronary bypass surgery that medicine relies on today.

Schwartz's alluring prospect of a medical utopia raises urgent questions, however. What are the scientific and public policy obstacles that must be overcome if such a goal is to become a reality? Restrictions on access imposed by managed care plans, the corporatization of charitable health care institutions, the increasing numbers of citizens without health insurance, the problems with malpractice insurance, and the threatened Medicare bankruptcy—all are the legacy of medicine's great progress in mastering the human body and society's inability to assimilate that mastery into existing economic, ethical, and legal structures. And if the average American life span is 130 years, a genuine possibility by 2050, what social and economic problems will result?

Schwartz examines the forces that have brought us to the current health care state and shows how those same forces will exert themselves in the decades ahead. Focusing on the inextricable link between scientific progress and health policy, he encourages a careful examination of these two forces in order to determine the kind of medical utopia that awaits us. The decisions we make will affect not only our own care, but also the system of care we bequeath to our children.

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