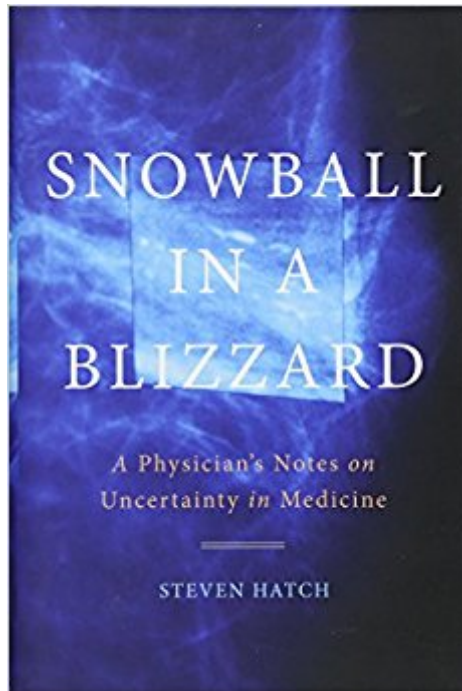




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Snowball In A Blizzard: A Physician's Notes On Uncertainty In Medicine



Synopsis

There's a running joke among radiologists: finding a tumor in a mammogram is akin to finding a snowball in a blizzard. A bit of medical gallows humor, this simile illustrates the difficulties of finding signals (the snowball) against a background of noise (the blizzard). Doctors are faced with similar difficulties every day when sifting through piles of data from blood tests to X-rays to endless lists of patient symptoms. Diagnoses are often just educated guesses, and prognoses less certain still. There is a significant amount of uncertainty in the daily practice of medicine, resulting in confusion and potentially deadly complications. Dr. Steven Hatch argues that instead of ignoring this uncertainty, we should embrace it. By digging deeply into a number of rancorous controversies, from breast cancer screening to blood pressure management, Hatch shows us how medicine can fail—sometimes spectacularly—when patients and doctors alike place too much faith in modern medical technology. The key to good health might lie in the ability to recognize the hype created by so many medical reports, sense when to push a physician for more testing, or resist a physician's enthusiasm when unnecessary tests or treatments are being offered. Both humbling and empowering, *Snowball in a Blizzard* lays bare the inescapable murkiness that permeates the theory and practice of modern medicine. Essential reading for physicians and patients alike, this book shows how, by recognizing rather than denying that uncertainty, we can all make better health decisions.

Book Information

Hardcover: 312 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; 1 edition (February 23, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465050646

ISBN-13: 978-0465050642

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 32 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #476,963 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #123 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Administration & Policy > Practice Management & Reimbursement](#) #169 in [Books > Medical Books > Administration & Medicine Economics > Practice Management & Reimbursement](#) #185 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Administration & Policy > Health Policy](#)

Customer Reviews

PRAISE FOR SNOWBALL IN A BLIZZARD: Informative; Snowball in a Blizzard adds an important perspective; [The book] rightly sounds the alarm: Better communication between doctors and patients is essential to improve medical decision making. —Wall Street Journal; [Snowball in a Blizzard is a] penetrating examination of uncertainty in diagnoses and treatment. —Nature; Snowball in a Blizzard is Hatch's first book, but the clarity and wit of his discussions rank with that of the best science writers. —Shelf Awareness

Steven Hatch is an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, working in the Division of Infectious Disease and Immunology. He lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

Great book! Dr. Hatch illustrates the importance of understanding the level of uncertainty that health care professionals (and patients) face daily. While the content relates specifically to medicine, the lessons can be extrapolated to our approach to the rest of the sciences and even to life in general. In today's world, both professional and lay person alike are bombarded with information. As humans we are predisposed to fit that information into a category of true/untrue. While this mode of thinking has many advantages (speed, simplicity) it also leads to placing too much confidence in some information and not in others which can in turn lead to bad choices. More and more we live in a society that deifies the role of the expert. When faced with a question outside of our own particular milieu, we place near 100% faith in the recommendations of one or more selected experts without appreciating the level to which that expert is or should be confident in that recommendation. In this book, Dr. Hatch helps us to identify when this type of mistake is likely to happen and provides us with a framework (the 'spectrum of uncertainty') to place this information in a more rational context. Let's hope we listen.

This book is excellent. And I will start with (what I believe to be) the best quote of the entire book (p. 84): "When health technologies are discussed in terms of righteousness, and aren't simply thought of as tools by which we might or might extend our lives, it becomes difficult to evaluate the technology for what it is. For screening mammograms are not, and never were a moral good: they are X-rays...." In a way, this book to me reads like something that Nicholas Taleb would discuss (he of the *The Black Swan: Second Edition: The Impact of the Highly Improbable: With a new section: "On Robustness and Fragility" (Incerto)* and *Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden*

Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets (Incerto)), but minus the babbling, expatiation and overweening ego. There is a huge volume of topics covered in a readable way (and this is not an exhaustive list, nor a listing on the meat of each chapter): 1. Cost benefit/ Risk benefit; 2. False positive/ false negative; 3. Bayesian probability/ Uncertainty quantification; 4. Correlation vs. Causation; 5. Loss of information as a result of transmission (the easiest way to lose intact information is to talk about it), à la Thomas Sowell's *Knowledge And Decisions*; 6. Types of studies (observational, cohort, double blind placebo controlled); 7. Discussion of the quantification of magnitude of some benefit; 8. Examples of overdiagnosis of cancers (i.e., higher number of diagnoses, but with a constant death rate). There are even a few \$5 words thrown in (armamentarium [p.128]/ frisson [p.129] /soporific [p. 242]) to build your vocabulary while reading this book. There are even a few cute allusions (eg. "Guide to the Perplexed", p 212), the Brady Bunch (p. 244). There is a good bibliography and appendix at the end of the book. The bad (only one point): The author keeps incessantly saying "more of this later" or "I'll explain this later." (pps 56, 93, 142, 163, 223-- and these are just the instances that I took the time to write down after it was starting to become a problem). Verdict: Worth the time. Worth the money (\$11.99 plus shipping, and this is from a person who does not usually pay more than \$0.01 for a book). Strongly recommended to put a dent in the cloying ignorance of the public with respect to how to intelligently discuss medical matters.

Get two copies: after you finish reading one, you'll want to give the other to your physician. Written with passion, humor, and Dawkins-class clarity, "Snowball in a blizzard" is as pleasurable to read as it is instrumental to the understanding of a central topic in every person's life. It is loaded with real world examples drawn from Hatch's experience as a physician and as a person, as well as the thorough research he has done for this book. Hatch considers multiple perspectives - of patients, research doctors, practicing physicians, the media, policy makers - and while the picture he paints is sometimes grim, his message is ultimately optimistic and empowering. If you liked Siddhartha Mukherjee's *Emperor of All Maladies*, I think you're going to enjoy *Snowball in a blizzard*. (OK, even if you didn't). This is without doubt one of the best books I've read in a long time!

Medicine has protected itself, its providers and its recipients from uncertainty and yet we know so little about health and illness, aetiology, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis. We have blurred the lines between normal and abnormal, and medicalised where we don't know whether we should or should not. While this is perhaps hard to accept, given our diet of fads and fantasies, our short term

memory and even shorter term attention span, it's certainly the case. The risk however is when we finally set a certainty point that it's an ever moving point. While I like this book, a lot, at times it falls for the very dynamic it seeks to unveil, trying to soothe us with moments of certainty. For instance - yes, vaccines are without a doubt one of medicine's current strongest certainties - but what might tomorrow bring? Is it the same for all vaccines? Will we one day have something more reliable than statistics on which to judge certainty? I think an open mind to uncertainty to the end of the book would have done the topic more justice.

It is critical that we understand medicine as informed art as well as science. Steven Hatch shows us why this is so, and also provides a simple template for media to follow to help lay readers understand the reliability of information, based on source, and method as well as what is not known.

A truthful look at a widely misunderstood science and appreciated by this reaser, who has undergone three major surgeries at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Especially, every woman ought to read this book.

this is a great book. i find it informative and entertaining. :) i will pass this on to my grandson who will graduate from LECOM med school next year. :)

Surprisingly considering the topics covered, it was hard to put the book down. I found several subjects that will guide my own decisions.

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