

UCSC grad winning kudos for 'Overtreated', a health care system critique

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Spending more on health care can be bad for our health, according to Shannon Brownlee, an award-winning medical journalist and UC Santa Cruz graduate who has earned widespread kudos for her book about the nation's sprawling health care system.

In "Overtreated: Why Too Much Medicine is Making Us Sicker and Poorer," Brownlee challenges common medical practices. She depicts an uneven delivery of medical services throughout the country that routinely makes unjustified costly promises without the science to back them up.

"There is remarkably little evidence to back up what physicians do," Brownlee said recently from her home in Maryland.

Named No. 1 Economics Book of 2007 by The New York Times, "Overtreated" has drawn the praise for its solution-oriented critique of U.S. health care delivery. It's also drawn fire.

"I certainly raise the ire of a lot of physicians," Brownlee said. "I get a lot of hate mail. I also get a lot of mail thanking me for talking about this. Many physicians are well aware that this is an enormous problem in the health system."

Brownlee, 51, who thought she was going to be a scientist, launched her writing career while a college student in Santa Cruz.

"I was a total science nerd," she said.

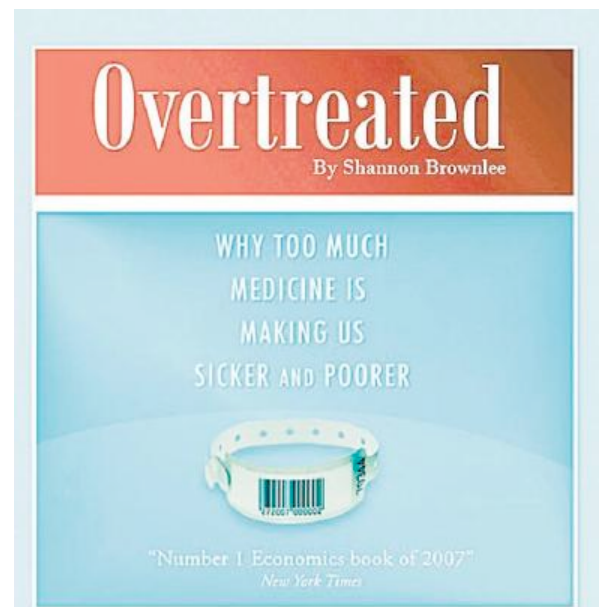
A native of Hawaii, Brownlee describes her college life in Santa Cruz as an idyllic time of educational adventures and possibility.

It was there that her mentor, the late biology professor Ken Norris, coached her "to think the unthinkable." As a senior, she studied lizards and turkey vultures in Baja. She watched large birds land on top of cacti and inexplicably spread their wings to the rising sun. She devised an experiment to determine what triggered their unusual morning behavior and determined it correlated more to temperature rather than to humidity. She earned a bachelor's degree in biology in 1979 and a master's degree in marine sciences in 1982.

"Santa Cruz was a really incredible place to actually do biology as an undergraduate. I felt like anything was possible as an undergraduate."

Early talent

During school, Brownlee supported herself as a programmer and illustrator. She focused on natural science, taking the bare minimum of humanity courses required to graduate. To make sure she could write scientifically, however, she signed up for John Wilkes' Science Writing course -- a decision that changed her career course.



"I pride myself on spotting talent," said Wilkes, who is now retired but enthusiastically tracks the successful careers of many of his former students. "What set her apart was her ability to get to the crux of any complicated story and then develop the story so the reader never lost the thread." Initially Brownlee was a little insecure about her writing skills. "My job was to give her the confidence she deserved."

Wilkes helped Brownlee get a newspaper internship at the Providence Journal and then a science writing job at Discover magazine even though she had no magazine writing experience. "I told Leon Jaroff, then-editor at Discover 'Look, I've got a star. Don't even ask me any questions. You better hire her.'"

Eventually that publication folded and Brownlee moved to Sports Illustrated, which was owned by the same company. Although a dream job for some young writers, it was not a good fit for Brownlee, who hated sports.

"It was a horrible time," Brownlee said of the two-year stint. "It was so boring. There's nothing to say in sports. He won. He lost. He overcame adversity."

Brownlee moved to U.S. News and World Report, returned to her scientific roots and in the next 10 years began exploring medical and health care issues. She retooled her career during a Knight journalism fellowship, refocusing, she says, on what a medical writer was supposed to be. Instead of reporting on the medical system she began to really challenge the status quo by questioning sensitive issues such as physician conflicts of interest resulting from their relationships with the pharmaceutical and insurance industries. Stories were often difficult to get published, she said.

"They simply couldn't believe what I was writing. It's very hard to criticize physicians. They hold a very important place in society and rightly so." But, she added, they don't always recognize the system they are operating within.

She began freelance writing. Despite the challenges of working on her own, she had more autonomy. She became increasingly interested in what she saw as a capricious connection between medical costs and results. In the places people paid more for health care they were often getting poorer outcomes. Eventually she stumbled on a rich vein of Dartmouth College research in which surveys of practice patterns showed that the rates of hospitalization and treatments couldn't be explained by looking at the differences in illness and outcomes. At UC San Francisco, patients spend a third less time in the hospital than if they were in the UCLA hospital systems, but the outcome wasn't longer life, Brownlee said.

"Some doctors just did more stuff," Brownlee said. "Partly it's the local medical culture and the different training cultures that encourage different treatments." The supply of medical resources such as the availability of hospital beds and specialists also drives care decisions. "Where you see more resources you see patients get more care but they don't have better outcomes. It does lead to higher costs."

Brownlee lives with her husband and 12-year-old son in Maryland.  
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