

Q&A for Joel Shulkin, MD

1. **What does a developmental-behavioral pediatrician do?**

- a. I'm a pediatrician by training and completed a fellowship in DBP, which means I specialize in children who are neurodivergent (autism, ADHD, social communication disorders) as well as children with learning or developmental disorders. I also run an international adoption clinic, doing pre-adoption consults and seeing children who have been adopted internationally. My specialty overlaps with neurology, psychology, psychiatry, and genetics, but I focus on early child development as well as how chronic medical conditions affect child development and behavior.

2. **How did you get into writing medical thrillers?**

- a. I had gotten one of those flyers from SEAK, and it was back when they were still doing contests. I wrote a short story called "Simon Says." I haven't gotten this one published yet, but it was about a psychiatrist visiting a very difficult patient—complicated, bipolar, manic—and I submitted it, and it ended up winning first prize. And I thought, OK, maybe I should write more medical kinds of things. After that, I was at a Massachusetts Medical Society meeting and Michael Palmer was there, giving a talk about how to write medical thrillers. I attended, and I got to talk to him afterwards about it. He really encouraged me and said, "If you write a medical thriller, I'll give you my list of agents, I'll write a blurb for you, do whatever you need." He was mentoring me and supporting me. So that really got my foot in the door.

3. **Where did you get the idea for your first book (Adverse Effects)?**

- a. I was on a bus riding into work in Boston on a snowy day, and there was nobody else in the bus, it was completely empty, just me and the driver. At the next stop this guy got on, and out of the entirely empty bus, he sat down right behind me. I thought that was just kind of uncomfortable, but then my writer's mind started working; I started thinking how creepy it would be if I were a woman in that situation. And how really freaked out I would be if he leaned forward and said something like "I know who you really are." When I got home and told my wife, we came up with the basic idea for *Adverse Effects*, the first book. I wrote literally one or two chapters a day; my wife would read the chapters as I wrote them, and she would just tell me "Go back and write the next one."

4. **How are you able to write while continuing to practice medicine full-time?**

- a. What I do is every morning from about 5:30 to 6:30, I have an hour to write. I try to write 500 words minimum, and some days it's a lot more than that; if I happen to have cancellations and I've got time over lunch, I can do a little work on my laptop. I also have Scrivener, which is an app that synchronizes my writing on my tablet, computer, and on my phone. If I've got a work in progress, and I'm sitting at the auto shop or the car dealer waiting for an hour, I can pull it up and do edits and write more on my phone. If I'm working on a manuscript, I'm only working on that one

until it's finished, and then I set it aside to go and work on the next one. In two and a half years I was able to get four manuscripts completed.

5. Are you a plotter or a “pantser?”

- a. I refer to myself as a “plants-er,” kind of in-between. *Adverse Effects* was pretty much just “pantsed” out. I just wrote it chapter by chapter to see what was going to come next. I couldn't do that for *Toxic Effects*, because I had a deadline. I had to have an idea of what I wanted, so I wrote a rough outline. The next books I've written, I've done more about really making a clearer outline, but not super detailed. I've recently started writing my first non-medical thriller, and I have that outline already. Then I can make changes along the way if I need to. With an outline, I tend not to totally let things go; you hear about writers who have a side character who runs away with the story, and that usually doesn't happen because I know whose story it is, and I know what I want to be happening and how I want the character to change by the end of the book.

6. How long were in the US Air Force and how did it affect your writing career?

- a. I served 6 years Active Duty in the USAF (3 in residency, and 3 overseas in Germany). From a professional standpoint, I learned to understand community pediatrics—how to use limited resources and the realities of diagnosing and treating children with complex developmental disorders away from “The Ivory Towers” of major teaching hospitals. I also learned how the military system works, including its successes and shortcomings. While I didn't do much writing during my AD time, I made my first attempt at a novel during my “year off” between separating from the military and returning to DBP fellowship; this is also when I started reading books on writing and taking courses to learn how to be a successful author. With *Heroic Measures*, I wanted to focus on the service members, the soldiers, airmen, and sailors who sacrifice everything for our freedoms, not on the military machine itself. As with any profession, there are those who try to corrupt the military for their own purposes, taking advantage of those service members. This book is intended to honor those who serve and those who care for them.

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