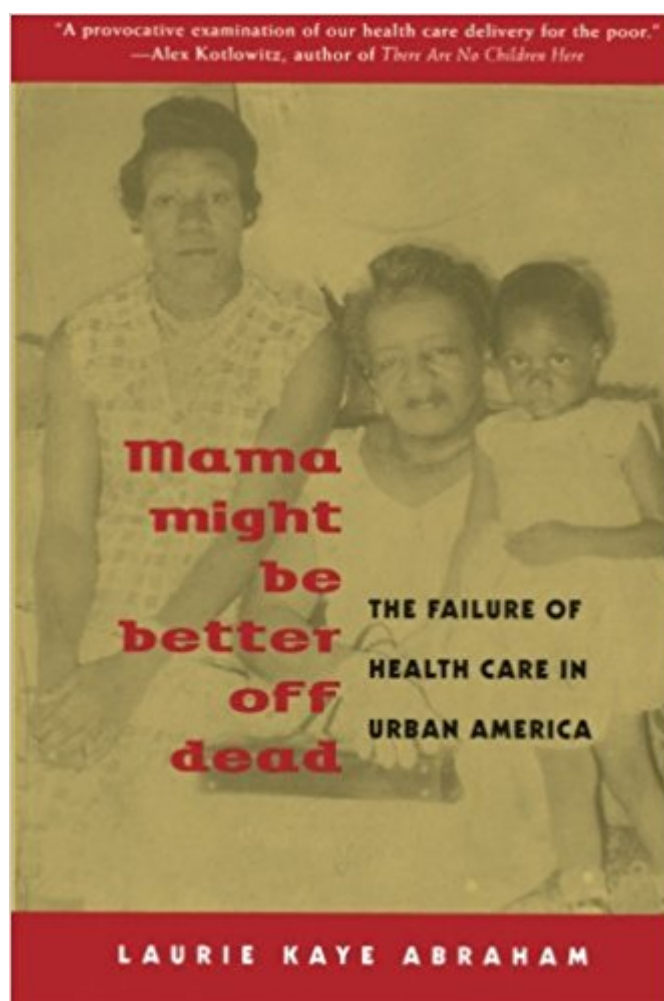


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# Mama Might Be Better Off Dead: The Failure Of Health Care In Urban America



## Synopsis

Mama Might Be Better Off Dead is an unsettling, profound look at the human face of health care. Both disturbing and illuminating, it immerses readers in the lives of four generations of a poor, African-American family beset with the devastating illnesses that are all too common in America's inner-cities. The story takes place in North Lawndale, a neighborhood that lies in the shadows of Chicago's Loop. Although surrounded by some of the city's finest medical facilities, North Lawndale is one of the sickest, most medically underserved communities in the country. Headed by Jackie Banes, who oversees the care of a diabetic grandmother, a husband on kidney dialysis, an ailing father, and three children, the Banes family contends with countless medical crises. From visits to emergency rooms and dialysis units, to trials with home care, to struggles for Medicaid eligibility, Abraham chronicles their access (or lack of access) to medical care. Told sympathetically but without sentimentality, their story reveals an inadequate health care system that is further undermined by the direct and indirect effects of poverty. When people are poor, they become sick easily. When people are sick, their families quickly become poorer. Embedded in the family narrative is a lucid analysis of the gaps, inconsistencies, and inequalities the poor face when they seek health care. This book reveals what health care policies crafted in Washington, D. C. or state capitals look like when they hit the street. It shows how Medicaid and Medicare work and don't work, the Catch-22s of hospital financing in the inner city, the racial politics of organ transplants, the failure of childhood immunization programs, the vexed issues of individual responsibility and institutional paternalism. One observer puts it this way: "Show me the poor woman who finds a way to get everything she's entitled to in the system, and I'll show you a woman who could run General Motors." Abraham deftly weaves these themes together to make a persuasive case for health care reform while unflinchingly presenting the complexities that will make true reform as difficult as it is necessary. *Mama Might Be Better Off Dead* is a book with the power to change the way health care is understood in America. For those seeking to learn what our current system of health care promises and what it delivers, it offers a place for the debate to begin.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The vicious circle of poverty and illness is powerfully portrayed in Abraham's ( Reinventing Home ) account of an uninsured, black, four-generational family in one of Chicago's "poorest and sickest" neighborhoods. Included in their medical misfortunes: the amputation of both legs of a diabetic grandmother; a drug-addicted husband on kidney dialysis who undergoes a kidney transplant; a partially stroke-paralyzed son; and children who lack primary care and immunization. This personally observed, lucid chronicle and call for reform of our ailing health system covers all levels of responsibility in the medical establishment, and deserves scrutiny by our administration's health service planners. Abraham concludes that a reformed health care system should set limits on health spending while stressing "caring" over "curing." Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This is a refreshing chronicle of the inadequate patchwork of federally funded health programs caring for our nation's urban poor. Journalist Abraham uses the medically plagued Banes family as a springboard for his analyses of the convoluted, mysterious, and at times nonsensical healthcare system that holds the urban poor captive. Unlike Alex Kotlowitz, whose *There Are No Children Here* ( LJ 4/1/91 ) elucidates the glaring inequities in our social system through the powerful story of two boys, Abraham uses the Banes's ill health as a pulpit for reciting numerous studies, quoting scholars, and commenting on current policy debates. Abraham does an excellent job of explaining the maze of healthcare programs available to the urban poor. More importantly, he clearly identifies in human and policy terms how these same programs have failed a population desperately in need of help. Recommended for most collections.- Karen A. Wolin, Univ. of Illinois Coll. of Medicine at Chicago Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Even though this book appears quite dated as this point - it is remarkable how it might have

happened today. This is an influential work detailing the failure of urban health and is a key read for anyone interested in health policy. The history is approachable here and takes place in Chicago. If you purchase this book realize you are purchasing a scholarly book which balances the "story" of how urban health fails in inner cities and limits the characterization of the individuals in the stories. I found Abrahams writing style helpful because it is "neutral" and so many health policy books appear to have an underlying agenda.

Had to read this book for a Medical Sociology course. I thought the title was a bit odd, but when I started reading the story of this one family that the author follows -- I couldn't put it down. I wanted to know what happened to these people. Their story could be the story of ANY family. It is not a happy story, but it is necessary to show how some people struggle to get adequate health care. For those who have super health care plans and no problem paying their co-pays or have never had a problem finding a doctor -- this is a book you should read. Just like many people are one paycheck away from being homeless, that also means being one paycheck away from having health insurance. It shows how the US health care system has contributed to many disparities in health.

Abraham presents facts and statistics of poor African Americans through the story of four generations in a poor Chicago family as they go through life navigating the health care system. The story is presented from a very fact based point of view. It includes the trials of Mrs. Jackson, the grandmother; Tommy, the son; Jackie, the caretaker and Tommy's daughter; Robert Banes, Jackie's husband; and their three children. Abraham presents the trouble deciding which jobs to take and how it will affect the overall family income when many jobs don't provide insurance. Statistics are presented on lack of family education about programs available for programs that would have not added income or taken away assistance they were already receiving. This book took into account the physician's assigned to the case when the patient is admitted without a primary physician, multiple residents and having to explain issues multiple times. Residents and physicians do not always look at the overall picture but the latest issue. Even the lack of physicians discussing do not resuscitate orders with the family when Mrs. Jackson is close to death was brought to light. I would like to ask the author what happened after the grandmother died and Robert received his transplant. How did the loss of SSI change their status and the outcome of their healthcare and financial status? Overall I give this book a 4 (very good). I agree with the authors position and policies set forth to help the poor are not working and need some serious revamping. I only rate it a four because of the tediousness of the information make it a hard to get through. This is a great

read for those who want to do public policy dealing with healthcare reform and anyone interested in the plight of the poor having to negotiate the current system.

A great read for a medical student to remind yourself why you went into medicine in the first place, how far the culture of medicine has come, and how much farther our system needs to go. The differences between the healthcare system in the late 1980's - early 1990's and now does not detract from this books many lessons in humanism in medicine.

Really nice quality. Should be a good read for my college class.

This is an epic book. Chicago, pay attention

I loved this book. It was so honest and the author did a very good job and helping you get to know the characters as if you were there watching it yourself. Definitely worth the read if you would like to know more about how Welfare, Medicare, and Medicaid really work for poverty level families.

The book was for my sister but I began reading some of it. I didn't finish but they book sounded interesting, The story is sad but true fro a lot of people.

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