Happy Accidents: Serendipity in Modern Medical Breakthroughs

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Dr. Meyers, who has been one of leading abdominal radiologists in the world for more than 30 years, has recently written a book entitled “Happy Accidents: Serendipity in Modern Medical Breakthroughs.” While I am reading the book, I feel an urge to introduce this book to all readers of the *Korean Journal of Radiology*. This book is based on a long experience and feeling on the modern medical breakthroughs of one talented and experienced abdominal radiologist.

In his book, Dr. Meyers is saying that medical discoveries in history came about because someone stumbled upon an answer and after some creative thought, figured out what problem had to be inadvertently solved. In science, surprising observations that lead to the development of several great commercial products happen all the time, but they have generally been kept secret. Opportunities for discovery present themselves every day, but not every one is able to take advantage of them.

Dr. Meyers asserts that fostering serendipity is important. He is saying that money does not foster new ideas, at least ideas that drive science; it only fosters applications of old ideas, most often enabling improvements but not discoveries. Only ideas and creative thought can provide an answer, and the ideas and creative thought are things that our existing system sadly lacks and fails to nurture. Serendipitous discoverers insist on trying to see beyond their own and others’ expectations and resist any pressure that would close off investigation. They break through, sidestep, or ignore any obstacle or objection to their chosen course.

Dr. Meyers has some concern over the peer review

system that is currently employed for the NIH grant application or journal review system. He is insisting that in the current review system, research has come to be characterized by large teams drawing upon multiple scientific disciplines and using highly technical methods in an environment that promotes the not-very-creative phenomenon known as groupthink. Researchers and Big Pharma generally disregard “niche” diseases, those affecting so few people that a breakthrough treatment would not lead to glory or profit. Peer review institutionalizes dogmatism by promoting orthodoxy. Who on a review committee is the peer of a maverick?

Finally, Dr. Meyers concludes that discoveries are surprises. You cannot plan surprise, but you can certainly create an environment in which they are apt to happen and are likely to be recognized and pursued when they do. Fostering openness to serendipity has the potential to accelerate medical discovery as never before.

I would like to recommend reading this book to my two sons who are students in engineering and medicine, respectively, to interns, residents and young medical investigators in my hospital, and finally to the readers of the *Korean Journal of Radiology*. Furthermore, I can say that to foster serendipity, ‘please be alert to new ideas and happenings and keep your imagination roaming’ as Dr. Meyers has insisted.

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