Dr. Fauci’s Memoir:
From Brooklyn Boy, to Becoming a Physician, to Pandemics

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In his newly released memoir, *On Call: A Doctor’s Journey in Public Service*, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci traces his journey of almost 84 years, which began on Christmas Eve in 1940, when he was born at Brooklyn Hospital to Eugenia and Stephen Fauci.

In Chapter 1, “Brooklyn Boy,” he recalls his early years in Bensonhurst, where the population was mostly Italian-Americans immigrants and first-generation families like the Faucis. When Anthony was eight, his father, a pharmacist, bought a two-story building in nearby Dyker Heights, and opened the Fauci Pharmacy. The family lived upstairs.

His father opened the drugstore at 9 a.m. and closed it at 10 p.m. six days a week. Young Anthony helped at the store and delivered prescriptions on his Schwinn bicycle. “Dad was generous to a fault when customers could not afford to pay their bills,” he writes. “He kept a running account. They can’t afford it; they are struggling. We will just put it on a tab.”

The values of consideration and taking care of others his parents instilled in him and his sister were reinforced in later years at the Jesuit schools he attended, Regis High School in New York City and The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass.

BECOMING DR. FAUCI

In the chapter, “Becoming Dr. Fauci,” he recalls his time at Cornell University Medical College in 1962 as “one of the happiest, most fulfilling periods of my life, learning how to become, and ultimately becoming, a physician.” A second-year course in physical diagnosis taught by Dr. Elliot Hochstein on “the fine points of history-taking and physical examination, the essence of the hands-on doctor,” was foundational for him and confirmed he had made the right choice in going to medical school.

Following graduation in 1966, he did his internal medicine residency at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, followed by a fellowship in infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He joined the NIH in 1968 as a clinical associate in the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and worked under Dr. Sheldon M. Wolff, chief of the Laboratory of Clinical Investigation, who became his mentor and close friend.

THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

Part Two of the memoir focuses on the AIDS era. Dr. Fauci’s career path took a turn in 1981 when he began to see patients, mostly gay young men, with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). He decided to transfer his research efforts in the laboratory on immune-mediated diseases to focus on “this mysterious new disease. I was trained for years as an immunologist and an infectious disease specialist. Here was a disease that certainly was infectious. It also was destroying the immune system and rendering the patients highly susceptible to opportunistic infections…I felt it was my destiny to get involved in this disease.”

Photo of Dr. Anthony Fauci, when he was Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases of the National Institutes of Health (1984–2022), taken in his office in 2003.

*Library of Congress, Michael Geissinger*
Initially, there were no medications to block HIV, and the median survival rate of patients being admitted to the NIH Clinical Center was 9–10 months. The name, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), had not yet even been used, he writes, and was often referred to as gay-related immune deficiency or GRID. In 1982, the CDC used the term AIDS for the first time.

Over the next few years, the full scope of the epidemic “reared its ugly head,” including cases among heterosexual male and female injection-drug users, transfusion-associated cases, and in newborns. Similar cases were reported worldwide among men and women.

**Turning points**

The search was on by scientists for a retrovirus that was likely causing AIDS. In 1983, French scientists at the Institut Pasteur discovered the HIV virus, and in 1984 proved that it was the cause of the disease AIDS. In 1985, a blood test was developed to screen for AIDS.

The drug azidothymidine (AZT), a chemotheraphy agent, was a turning point for patients with AIDS, and, in 1986, a clinical trial showed its effectiveness as a potent inhibitor of HIV in a test tube. AZT was approved by the FDA in 1987 under the name zidovudine. But the virus mutated and it soon became apparent that a combination of drugs was necessary.

**AIDS Activism**

In the early 1980s, there was frustration in the gay community that the U.S. government was not doing enough to call attention to and act on the emerging AIDS epidemic. Activists, feeling that the government was failing them, targeted Fauci, in public face of AIDS, throughout the 1980s. Playwright and leader of the activist movement Larry Kramer, in a June 1988 article in the *San Francisco Examiner*, wrote a piece titled: “I Call You Murderers: An Open Letter to an Incompetent Idiot, Dr. Anthony Fauci.” He accused Fauci of facilitating the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of people with HIV.

“His rationale for the attack was that I had not demanded enough money for AIDS,” Fauci writes. “He ignored the fact that I had requested from Congress and the president the largest increase in resources given to an NIH institute since the famous ‘war on cancer’ in the 1970s.”

But when Dr. Fauci came out in support of a “parallel track” of drug testing that allowed patients with AIDS access to experimental treatments, the tide turned. In 1989, Dr. Fauci invited a cadre of activists who had descended on the NIH up to a conference room. “They were shocked. This was the first time in anyone’s memory that a government official had invited them to sit down and talk on equal terms.”

When Dr. Fauci was appointed Director of NIAID in 1984, he expanded funding for AIDS research and established a program dedicated exclusively to the disease. Later, during the George W. Bush administration, he spearheaded the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), a program that has saved more than 25 million lives by distributing AIDS treatments around the globe.

**Personal Life**

During this period, he married Christine Grady, RN, PhD, who is now chief of the Department of Bioethics at the NIH Clinical Center. The couple have three daughters, and a granddaughter. The memoir touches on the intersection of their personal and professional lives. “It has not always been easy...long hours, missing out on personal and family time, and enormous burdens of responsibility, and considerable anxiety and stress, and at times opposition and even hostility.”

**The COVID-19 Pandemic**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – and his role as “the de facto public face of the country’s battle with the disease” – further heightened media and public attention on him, for better and for worse. He describes President Trump’s interactions with him as unpredictable and mercurial, and sharpens his pen when reporting remarks President Trump made during White House briefings. “He shocked me on day one of his presidency with his disregard of facts. He seemed to conflate COVID with influenza.”

He also describes a meeting of the coronavirus task force, with the president “venting that we were seeing more cases only because we were doing more testing, and that ‘other countries looked good because they were not testing.’

“OK, Mr. President,” I said, looking straight at him. “We are now in the Oval Office so you need to hear it directly from us. Increased testing does not cause cases. When you increase testing, you will, of course, pick up asymptomatics whom you might not otherwise notice. However, when you have increased percent positives, increased hospitalizations, and increased deaths, that means there are truly more cases.”

While the rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccines during what was termed Operation Warp-Speed is a highlight of the Trump administration, criticism of lockdowns and school closures resulted in vitriolic attacks on Dr. Fauci by anti-vaxxers, the far-right politicians, and media/political strategists such as Steve Bannon, who called for “Fauci’s head to be put on a pike.” A security detail was put in place for Dr. Fauci and his family.

**Reflections**

As Dr. Fauci sums it up, the memoir focuses not on the dark days and the disinformation diatribes but on the “trials, tribulations, and mostly the rewards, experienced by someone who gave it his all. To this day, fifty years later, when I think of my identity, it is as Tony Fauci, physician.”

For his accomplishments as a physician-scientist, Dr. Fauci was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the National Medal of Science. Currently, he serves as Distinguished University Professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine and the McCourt School of Public Policy.

Far more than the classic “triple threat” in medicine – patient care, teaching, and research – Dr. Fauci’s career encompassed all of these, and his administrative and public policy skills establish him as the quintessential “quadruple” and even “quintuple threat.”