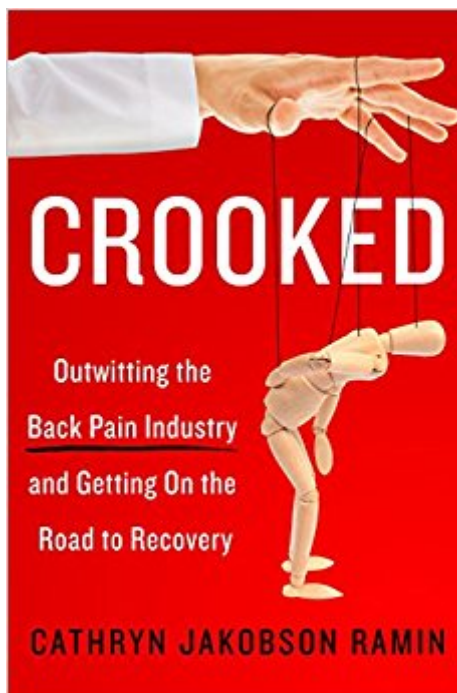




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# Crooked: Outwitting The Back Pain Industry And Getting On The Road To Recovery



## Synopsis

The acclaimed author of *Carved in Sand*—a veteran investigative journalist who endured persistent back pain for decades—delivers the definitive book on the subject: an essential examination of all facets of the back pain industry, exploring what works, what doesn't, what may cause harm, and how to get on the road to recovery. In her effort to manage her chronic back pain, investigative reporter Cathryn Jakobson Ramin spent years and a small fortune on a panoply of treatments. But her discomfort only intensified, leaving her feeling frustrated and perplexed. As she searched for better solutions, she exposed a much bigger problem. Costing roughly \$100 billion a year, spine medicine—often ineffective and sometimes harmful—exemplified the worst aspects of the U.S. health care system. The result of six years of intensive investigation, *Crooked* offers a startling look at the poorly identified risks of spine medicine, and provides practical advice and solutions. Ramin interviewed scores of spine surgeons, pain management doctors, physical medicine and rehabilitation physicians, exercise physiologists, physical therapists, chiropractors, specialized bodywork practitioners. She met with many patients whose pain and desperation led them to make life-altering decisions, and with others who triumphed over their limitations. The result is a brilliant and comprehensive book that is not only important but essential to millions of back pain sufferers, and all types of health care professionals. Ramin shatters assumptions about surgery, chiropractic methods, physical therapy, spinal injections and painkillers, and addresses evidence-based rehabilitation options—showing, in detail, how to avoid therapeutic dead ends, while saving money, time, and considerable anguish. With *Crooked*, she reveals what it takes to outwit the back pain industry and get on the road to recovery.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 448 pages

Publisher: Harper; 1 edition (May 9, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0062641786

ISBN-13: 978-0062641786

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.4 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 107 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #9,869 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Backache #11 in Books > Medical Books >

## Customer Reviews

"A well-researched and fascinating read detailing the heart-wrenching experience so common to millions of back pain sufferers. Ramin exposes the devastating financial and emotional cost of back pain. Ultimately, her in-depth research lights the way to a better path for healing." (Miranda Esmonde-White, New York Times bestselling author of *Forever Painless*)

"Ramin offers a thoughtful and heartfelt way to treat one of humankind's most debilitating disorders—chronic back pain. A remarkable guide from someone who unfortunately had to make the journey, and found her way out." (Paul A. Offit, MD, author of *Pandora's Lab: Seven Stories of Science Gone Wrong*)

"I see back pain patients who have undergone invasive procedures before they go through evidence-based rehabilitation. In a most engaging way, Cathryn Jakobson Ramin tells it like it is. Whether you're a patient, a physician, or a public policy wonk, you should read this book." (VIJAY VAD, MD, sports medicine specialist at the Hospital for Special Surgery, and author of *Back RX*)

"Ramin has written a riveting and disturbing account of a sector of American medicine that's gone very wrong. Politics, science, history—it's all in there, along with concrete advice for fellow sufferers. Policymakers can learn from this book, and patients can, too." (Jonathan Cohn, author of *The Untold Story of America's Health Care Crisis* and *The People Who Pay the Price*)

"[A] thoroughly reported first-person take on the back-pain industry . . . Buyer beware! This cautionary book ends on a high note with the once-hobbled-by-back-pain author standing up straight and hiking a 13,000-foot trail in the Peruvian Andes." (Booklist)

From a veteran journalist who endured persistent back pain for decades, an essential examination of all facets of the back pain industry: what works, what doesn't, what may cause harm, and how to get on the road to recovery. In her effort to manage her chronic back pain, investigative reporter Cathryn Jakobson Ramin spent years and a small fortune on a panoply of treatments. But her discomfort only intensified, leaving her feeling frustrated and perplexed. In the process of searching for better solutions, she exposed a much bigger problem. Costing roughly \$100 billion a year, spine medicine is often ineffective and sometimes harmful—it exemplified the worst aspects of the U.S. health care system. The result of six years of intensive reporting, *Crooked* offers

a startling look at back pain medicine, and provides practical advice and solutions. Jakobson Ramin interviewed scores of spine surgeons, pain management doctors, physical medicine and rehabilitation physicians, exercise physiologists, physical therapists, chiropractors, and specialized bodywork practitioners. She met with many patients whose pain and desperation led them to make life-altering decisions, and with others who triumphed over their limitations. Stuningly brilliant and utterly comprehensive, *Crooked* is not only important but also essential to millions of back pain sufferers and all types of health care professionals. Jakobson Ramin shatters assumptions about surgery, chiropractic methods, physical therapy, spinal injections, and painkillers, and addresses evidence-based rehabilitation options—showing, in detail, how to avoid therapeutic dead ends, while saving money, time, and considerable anguish.

Lets start with the most important aspect of this book. If you suffer from back or neck pain, this is a **MUST** read so that you can avoid the cascade of evaluations and treatments that are unlikely to help and often cause great harm (not to mention the enormous and unnecessary expense)..My name I Brian Nelson. I am an orthopedic surgeon specializing in spine and I am quoted extensively in this tour de force. I first met Cathryn many years ago after she was given my name by a colleague. She called me for the first of many interviews and I had a chance to get acquainted with a classic investigative reporter. You know the type: persistent, devoted to the truth, scholarly, curious, demanding that obscure medical jargon be explained in easily understood terms. She spent almost ten years on this book which likely explains why it is so outstanding, and carries such credibility. Meticulously sourced and backed up with peer reviewed research, you can believe what she has written. I supervised the treatment of approximately 150,000 spine pain patients over that past 25 + years and I have seen every treatment come and go. I have heard stories that would break your heart. I have followed the exploits of spine surgeons I believed should have been jailed to punish them for the trail of broken bodies left in their wake, I saw money corrupt an industry designed to enrich providers and hospitals medical device companies at the expense of patients, I saw doctors collude with attorneys to extract as much money as possible from insurance companies. You may find Cathryn's book infuriating but after finishing it, she may have been too lenient. Too be clear, I also know many reputable practitioners who consistently strive to deliver the right care to patients regardless of the financial concern. I know many fine surgeons, chiropractors, physiatrists, pain doctors, etc. who are a credit to their profession. Nevertheless, there are far too many of the opposite character who shamelessly exploit a system that allows spine care to remain dysfunctional. This wouldn't be a huge problem if patients could differentiate the good from the bad

but they cannot. As Cathryn so amply demonstrates, patients are easily fooled by professional web sites enhanced with state of the art search engine optimization. Patients desperate for relief are easy marks for slick copy writing promising completely unrealistic success rates while ignoring risks and costs. Look at the number of patients who were willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket for unproven treatments that often made them worse. I was always astounded in my own town (Minneapolis) that surgeons known to have terrible outcomes were nevertheless full. A nice office with an espresso machine and a smiling surgeon in an expensive suit and a starched white coat is no guarantee of good care but many patients are quick to believe that it is. I used to tell patients when I was doing surgery that I didn't make any money talking to them. 95% of my income came from operating. And I also learned early on that because of the vast difference in orthopedic knowledge between me and my patients, I could talk most anyone into surgery if I tried ("He would never tell me I needed surgery if it wasn't true"). This is a sacred trust given to surgeons but unfortunately, not all have the character to overcome this enormous conflict of interest.. The same applies to pain doctors, chiropractors, therapists, injectionists, etc. All have the ability to offer and perform unnecessary care and get paid for it. Health care providers- including hospitals- are well aware of how much they earn and what their expenses are. If new medical evidence shows that a major source of revenue is ineffective, how many will discontinue its use and perhaps go into the red for their practice or hospital? This is why , even in the face of the evidence provided in this book supporting the ineffectiveness of opioids, spine surgeries, injections, and MRIs there has been little change in frequency. That our payment incentives have had the unintended consequence of often harming patients has been recognized by payers (government included) and efforts are underway to change. Can we devise a system that pays for outcomes rather than paying for services regardless of effectiveness? Unless we do, I fear things will not change. Finally, I agree completely with Cathryn about the importance of exercise. It is not that no one ever needs spine surgery or an injection or an MRI. It is that the vast majority of patients should not undergo these procedures unless they give themselves the chance to avoid them by engaging in a good intensive exercise program along with counseling in fear avoidance or underlying false beliefs creating tension. Get on a program and stay with it for the rest of your life and you give yourself the best chance of being as good as you can be. Thank you Cathryn for publishing what I believe could be one of the most universally helpful medical books ever written.

Nicely constructed book that explains the terrible pitfalls of back procedures and then offers sound advice on how to deal with pain management and recovery. The book is well-written and

researched. Both an industry expose and a resource for best solutions.

Great book. a must read for those that suffer from any type of back challenges.

Very informative! Wish I had read it years ago.

One of my patients suggested the book after she heard an interview with Cathryn on NPR. I read it in 2 sittings - it's compelling and easy to understand. I would like to thank Cathryn Ramin for an excellent job of laying bare the US back pain industry and affirming many of my own views. I am a San Francisco chiropractor and strongly recommend *Crooked* to anyone with a spine. Back pain is the number one cause of disability WORLD wide, and 80% of the population will suffer disabling back pain in their lifetime, I have! So will you. So be proactive. As an actively practicing chiropractor, I see it all day long and we do our best to serve these patients, many young and many from the Financial District. Often patients are first seen by medical doctors or nurse practitioners and have already been referred for x-ray or MRI and received medications for; inflammation, pain, and muscle spasms for a diagnosis of non-traumatic back pain without significant neurological signs or symptoms. These patients have taken their first steps towards the slippery slope toward ever-invasive procedures, injections, medications (including opioids) and often ending in useless surgery(s). Degree of pain and severity of condition often do NOT correlate. Many of the films I review have signs of normal skeletal aging, such as degenerative disc disease, disc protrusions, disc desiccation, etc. often the very reason for surgical intervention. Cathryn discusses how doctors use these "findings" to get patients to submit to their recommendations. When I have films, I look for contraindications for treatment; cancer, fracture, etc., not reasons to treat. As with all professions, there will be truly dedicated health care providers who care about patient outcomes and others who are interested in their own financial wellbeing at the expense of the patient. A sobering discussion about money, conflicts of interest, and cross-referring should make patients wary to whom they are referred. Cathryn does an excellent job of presenting the shortcomings of much of the medical industrial complex including the chiropractic sector. Too often chiropractors rely on the subluxation model rather than incorporating exercises, ergonomics and soft tissue therapies and over treatment is a concern. For better or worse, insurance often drives the procedures doctors get paid for and hence are willing to perform. In the chiropractic industry, this has often been distilled down to the adjustment. So if your plan has chiropractic, be aware that your doctor may be getting paid as little as \$27 for that visit and it is

unrealistic to expect to receive the treatment that you really need, even if the doctor has the skill to provide it. The medical model is fee for service and the more complicated the procedure the better the reimbursement. \$50-100 thousand for back surgery, why would a surgeon recommend exercises, P.T., chiropractic, or biofeedback? In general, medical doctors and specifically, surgeons have significant cultural authority and people listen. Patients don't know how their bodies work and don't have the knowledge to question doctors. They don't realize that 25% of patients with disc herniations have NO back pain, a classic indication for surgery. When the surgery is "successful" (no more herniation on MRI), but the symptoms remain or worsen, further surgery is proposed until failed back surgery symptoms cause the patient to be relegated to the opioid and often heroin wasteland. As Cathryn points out, "discs don't slip" - discs are securely attached to the endplates of the vertebral bodies, but they do bulge and herniate. The good news is that the older you are, the less likely they are to herniate, because they dry out. Imagine having the L5/S1 disc removed. That last disc supports your entire upper body weight. It is the only structural support that connects your top half of your body with the bottom half and now someone is going to chisel and drill out that disc and fuse it, eliminating all movement. Imagine all the scar tissue that develops from such a procedure. Frequently, this is done without aggressive and failed conservative therapy first? Insane. Cathryn discusses our sedentary lifestyles with too much sitting, with forward head posture and a flexed (c-curved) spine causing; deconditioning, muscle loss muscle spam and pain. Proper reconditioning with exercises and soft tissue work can make such a difference. The psoas, piriformis, quadratus lumborum, erectors spinae and gluteal muscles are all so important for trunk stability. She talks about pain avoidance behavior that further worsens the deconditioning. In the second half of the book, Cathryn provides many solutions for patients with back pain, but unfortunately, there is not a one size fits all, as would be expected. Some patients do well with McKenzie spinal extension, others with Cox flexion distraction. McGill and "extension" advocate, suggests strengthening before stretching; Gary Cook says that you can't provide a stability solution to a mobility problem with his successful Functional Movement Screen protocols. Active Release and Graston work on soft tissue and fascial adhesions to promote oxygenation, reduce muscle spam and improve movement, hence decreasing pain. There is Yoga, Tai Chi, Feldenkries and others therapies. One theme that keeps returning is the importance of proper body conditioning with correctly executed exercises and reducing the spinal insults of poor posture and ineffective body mechanics. I tell my patients that there is no free lunch. We all pay with our time and money. It just depends where you want to spend

either - at the gym, personal trainer, yoga, chiropractor, on meds, surgery, P.T., etc. We have only one body and how we use or abuse it will often determine our quality of life and the likelihood of back problems is almost inevitable in our society. As for myself, I occasionally have low back tightness and pain, especially after a 3-hour squash workout, but I consider myself recovered. I have already recommended this book to a back pain sufferer who called me from North Carolina for advice. I strongly recommend this book. Thank you Cathryn for your hard work and insights. Kai Tiltmann

What a great, helpful book. Ramin really nails it, exposing the crooked medical back industry

Most helpful! I recommend it highly - a must read! - to health care professionals who might be dealing with patients with back pain, to physical therapists, to rehab people, AND to anybody who is dealing with back/spine issues. Well researched and well written.

Ok

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