
REFLECTIONS

WHY I ENVY ERIN BROCKOVICH

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One recent Sunday I treated myself to the movie "Erin Brockovich." The movie's story line is gripping: A \$38-billion utility company has contaminated the groundwater and adjacent well with hexavalent chromium. As part of an abatement plan, the company has started to buy up surrounding real estate at market value. A price dispute ensues.

Erin Brockovich, newest file clerk at a small law firm, finds medical records of the occupants of the properties mixed in with their real estate files. She is puzzled by the variety and severity of the medical findings. In a moment of distraction, her boss gives her permission to investigate. After a great deal of personal persuasion, Erin convinces 614 parties to join in a class-action suit, alleging that their gamut of medical problems is due to hexavalent chromium-contaminated drinking water. When all is said and done, the plaintiffs collect \$330 million. We are assured that this really happened and amounted to the largest settlement of this kind in US history. The real Erin Brockovich, who made it happen, has earned more than a cameo appearance as a waitress in the film.

Despite the chilling subject, "Erin Brockovich" bubbles right along, carried by a vivacious Julia Roberts in the title role. If she does not keep the viewer engaged, additional interesting characters will: A lawyer who is a pussycat, not a tiger. A biker with a heart. A quiet whistleblower. The movie enjoys competent direction by Steven Soderbergh, a pleasant surprise in the performance of Aaron Eckhart as the loving biker, and an occasional nice shot of the high desert of California. Although the editing is unimaginative, the movie provides a couple of hours of splendid entertainment.

The unlikely heroine has serendipity, the ability to make a fortuitous discovery. She has the drive and determination of David defeating Goliath. She has the communicative skills to draw her clients in. She wins them over with a genuine display of empathy. It's because of these skills that I, the doctor, envy Erin Brockovich.

Earlier this year I had watched another movie, "A Civil Action," with John Travolta in the role of environmental lawyer Jan Schlichtman. This film traces the events in Woburn MA, a town 12 miles outside of Boston where there was a cluster of childhood leukemias (12 cases found versus 5 predicted between 1969 and 1979). The households of Woburn had contaminated drinking water, allegedly from industrial sites.

In Dover Township NJ, a cluster of childhood cancers (90 cases found versus 67 predicted between 1979 and 1995) is being studied. The townspeople think there may be an association with water contamination from a toxic industrial site and its wastewater pipeline. Contaminated wells have since been capped, the aquifer is undergoing cleanup, and the investigation is ongoing.

"Erin Brockovich" and "A Civil Action" remind me of the need to keep my eyes wide open. The stories enforce the need to look beyond the immediate patient, searching for patterns and explanations. We need to see both the forest and the trees. In the movie, as in real life, Erin is unexpectedly rewarded for her troubles. As she fights for her clients, she climbs from beagle to legal eagle, rising from an entry-level clerical job without benefits to a respected force receiving a \$2-million bonus. We should all be as successful in our role as social advocates. ■