Modern medicine is a rapidly evolving and diverse field that relies increasingly on technological developments. Many of these developments involve the sophisticated application of the fundamental principles of physics. As a result, there is a growing need for an educated community of scientists, engineers, and technicians who have some background in the relationship between these principles and the applications. Our book is intended to meet this need. Equally important is that we hope it is useful for students majoring in diverse subject areas (psychology, natural sciences, nursing, engineering, . . . .) who are curious about this field and/or intend to find careers in related subjects.

Every reader of this book has either heard of or experienced personally one or more of the ubiquitous applications in modern medicine. Did you not wonder how such things work? For example, two of the book’s three authors have seen high-resolution ultrasound images of their children in the mother’s uterus; this is a truly remarkable technique! The reader should recognize similarly that when the first X-ray images were obtained, just about a century ago, the observers were equally dazzled by those pictures. Indeed, they were even more surprised because at the time no one knew what an X-ray was.

Our book is designed to provide a useful introduction to the various methods of modern medicine as well as a resource “handbook,” helpful for understanding future developments. The contents should be comprehensible to undergraduate students who have a background equivalent to a 1-year physics course at the introductory level, as is taught at most colleges and universities. Parts of the book (especially chapters 1 and 2) do not require even this background. Readers with a more extensive exposure to physics may skip chapter 3 or refer to it while reading later chapters.

The idea for this book emerged out of a course, Applications of Modern Physics in Medicine, created and taught for the last 11 years by one of the authors (Mark Strikman). He found that this course’s ability to bring students to the cutting edge of science (e.g., applications that are just now entering hospitals) is particularly stimulating for both him, the teacher, and the students. The success of this course (i.e., increasing enrollment and favorable student reviews), our enthusiasm for the subject, and the recognition of the need for such a book are together responsible for our interest in writing it. While the subject is of immense scientific interest for its own sake, we hope that the book will have particular appeal for the growing number of students who are considering careers in medical physics, biophysics, medicine or nuclear engineering. In addition, it should appeal to current practitioners of the diverse medical technologies in use today. Furthermore, it is possible that the book will be used as
a supplement to courses in nuclear physics and engineering, as well as biophysics
courses. Finally, we hope that individuals with a reasonable physics background who
experience medical problems and receive diagnoses and treatments will be interested
in learning more about the underlying science presented here.

The overall subject content of this book corresponds closely to that of the Penn
State one-semester physics course from which the book emerged. In detail, however,
the book’s content differs in many ways from the course, especially in topic empha-
sis and in choice of model calculations, as well as level of presentation. Any course
using this book as a text could apply it in a variety of ways, depending on the stu-
dents’ backgrounds and interests. For students seeking just a qualitative overview of
this subject, chapters 3 and 4 can be omitted. For other kinds of students (those with
particularly strong backgrounds in physics), the extended review of modern physics
presented in chapter 3 may not be necessary, although our experience suggests that
students appreciate the opportunity to fill gaps in their understanding of some topics
(and most students have more than a few such gaps). Chapter 4 goes into consider-
able detail about the nature of particle propagation in matter. In some cases, this level
of presentation may not be particularly useful, so it might not need to be covered.
Chapter 5 is concerned with the interactions between radiation and living tissues.
This is important for understanding why some methods are used, while others are
not, in assessing or treating medical conditions in various parts of the body. The last
three chapters provide the principal aspects of medical physics, applying the princi-
pies described in chapters 3–5. Hence these final chapters merit particular attention
in any version of a comprehensive approach to this subject; they are not to be missed.

In writing this book, we have been excited to learn about the wide variety of tech-
niques used in the development of the tools of modern medicine. At the same time,
trying to understand these techniques is a humbling experience because the literature
is not always transparent, often assuming a strong physics or medical background on
the part of the reader. This problem is especially true of the most recent discoveries,
reported by scientists who are narrowly focused and eager to get their work pub-
lished quickly in the most prominent scientific journals. We hope that our attempts to
understand and explain these topics have been clear and accurate. Readers wishing
to comment critically on the text are invited to contact the authors; their input will be
appreciated.

This book provides two levels of description. In some cases, for example, chap-
ters 1 and 2, the presentation is primarily qualitative and nontechnical. In other cases,
it is fairly technical and quantitative. We believe that most of the discussion does not
require a mastery of physics as we have described the various techniques in primarily
qualitative terms. We hope that nonphysicists are not intimidated by the technical
discussion presented in some cases. While the book includes a relatively large num-
ber of equations, one does not need them to understand how any of the methods
work.

In the medical physics course taught at Penn State, students were presented with
some quantitative problems, meaning that a certain level of mathematical competence
was needed. Some students had difficulty coping with the breadth of the phys-
ics subject matter, which is not surprising—given the breadth of the subject matter.
Many students found especially challenging, if not annoying, the wide variety of
systems of units (such as ergs, calories, Btu, joules, and electron volts for energy),
reflecting the extended history of the subject and the diverse origins of the various
methods used in medicine. In many cases, we have tried to present numerical calculations several ways to accommodate these different sets of units.

This book includes many problems, all of which are original. They vary considerably in difficulty, so students should be aware of this variation and course instructors should take care in designing homework assignments. Solutions to all the problems are included in an Instructor’s Manual, provided by Princeton University Press to faculty teaching a course based on this textbook. There is also a companion Web page: modernphysicsinmedicine.com, which is freely available to the general public. Readers will find there a wide variety of informative resources. Included are Mark Strikman’s lecture notes from the most recent version of the Penn State course, Applications of Physics in Medicine. These notes will be updated frequently. Also found on the Web site is a comprehensive bibliography of the subject, also revised as needed. Finally, a number of publications can be found there. Among these are articles of primarily historical interest, such as “ancient” publications in the research literature, as well as articles from current semipopular literature, which helps to make aspects of medical physics accessible to interested individuals.

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