

## Book review

### Better, a surgeon's notes on performance

By Atul Gawande, 2007

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Alongside Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, Atul Gawande is one of my heroes and this is the second time I have read 'Better, a surgeon's notes on performance'.

The first time I picked up the book I have to confess that I was hoping that I would be a better surgeon at the end. I'm not sure whether I was any better having put the book down, but was certainly wiser and better informed regarding key areas in medicine where performance has improved. The second time I didn't have quite the same expectation, and was able to read more critically as a review for MBMJ.

Atul Gawande is a practicing endocrine surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Massachusetts and a professor at Harvard Medical School. He presented the BBC's annual Reith Lectures in 2014 giving four talks entitled, 'The Future of Medicine'.

'Better' is Gawande's second book, published in 2007 and follows his first book 'Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science' published in 2002. Gawande's third book 'The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right' was published in 2009 and his fourth book, 'Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End' in 2014.

'Better' focuses on the virtues of diligence, doing right and ingenuity to improve medical performance. There are chapters describing how these virtues have been successfully applied to improve medical care in many disciplines including obstetrics, paediatrics, and the public health control of infection. There are interesting discussions on how advances in military medicine have significantly improved the survival war casualties and the possible role of medics in capital punishment.

When I read a book on my Kindle I make notes of quotations that strike me, here are my favourites from 'Better':

On diligence... *"The necessity of giving sufficient attention to detail to avoid error and prevail against obstacles"*

On the responsibility most of us feel to take care of people even when their insurers exasperate us or when they have no insurance at all... *"If we fail ordinary people, then the notion that we do something special is gone."*

On doctors being involved with executions... *"... to choose between the ethical codes of their professions and the desires of broader society. The codes of medical societies are not always right and neither are the laws of society. There are vital but sometimes murky differences between acting skilfully, acting lawfully, and acting ethically."*

On better... *"Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try."*

And the best part of the book? Afterword: five suggestions for becoming a Positive Deviant. Atul's lecture

to medical students at Harvard Medical School where he gives five suggestions for how one might make a worthy difference, how one might become on the positive end of the Bell Curve:

1. Ask an unscripted question.

*"Ours is a job of talking to strangers, why not learn something from them?"*

Although there are many questions the doctor requires to ask the patient to obtain a full medical history, at some point in the consultation, ask an unscripted question, such as, "Where did you grow up?", or even "What did you think of the game last night?"

*"If you ask an unscripted question, the machine begins to feel less like a machine."*

2. Don't complain.

3. Count something.

*"If you count something you find interesting, you will learn something interesting"*

4. Write something.

*"By offering your reflections to an audience, even a small one, you make yourself part of a larger world."*

5. Change.

*"Make yourself an early adopter."*

#### In summary:

*"Find something new to try, something to change. Count how often you succeed and how often you fail. Write about it. Ask people what they think. See if you can keep the conversation going."*

All in all, an absorbing, informative and very interesting read, though my favourite Gawande book remains 'The Checklist Manifesto' which I genuinely do consider has made me a better team player, clinician and surgeon.

If you haven't read any of Atul Gawande's books and want a bit of an insight, but don't particularly fancy reading, try his TEDx presentations: 'How do we heal medicine', and 'Want to get great at something? Get a coach.'

[https://www.ted.com/talks/atul\\_gawande\\_how\\_do\\_we\\_heal\\_medicine](https://www.ted.com/talks/atul_gawande_how_do_we_heal_medicine)

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