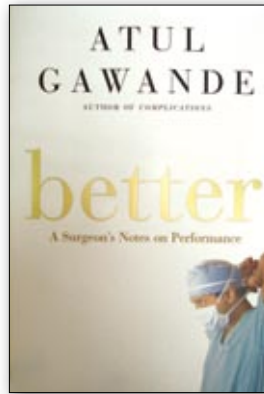


By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

# Better

## A Surgeon's Notes on Performance



Did you know Apgar was a woman (Virginia Apgar), and only the second board-certified anaesthesiologist in America? Or that obstetric forceps were invented by Peter Chamberlen in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century but selfishly remained the Chamberlen family's "trade secret" for almost 150 years before the secret was discovered? Atul Gawande's second book *Better – A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* (the first was *Complications – A Surgeon's Notes on Imperfect Science*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist of the 2002 US National Book Award) juxtaposes snippets of medical history with modern day practice and is liberally peppered with anecdotes from his diverse experiences as a general surgeon at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, MacArthur fellow, and staff writer for the *New Yorker*.

*Better – A Surgeon's Notes on Performance* tells through 11 compelling essays divided into three sections entitled "Diligence", "Doing Right" and "Ingenuity" (chosen as essential components "for success in medicine or in any endeavour that involves risk and responsibility") Dr Gawande's observations of how doctors have strived to close the gap between good intentions and outstanding performance. Dr Gawande's easy writing style coupled with his deep and painfully honest insights into the practice of medicine make *Better* gripping and immediately resonating with medical professionals.

The first section examines how hard but nonetheless how important it is for doctors to be diligent, drawing from examples as diverse as hand-washing and infection control,

controlling a polio outbreak in India and the experiences of American trauma surgeons in Iraq. In the second section which I found rather short and superficially covered given the rich complexity of the subject matter (but perhaps necessary given the short attention span of the public these days), Dr Gawande relates the challenges doctors face in 'doing right'. The intensely personal stories told to him of morale-sapping and depression-inducing litigation (the story of the doctor turned medical litigation lawyer is especially thought-provoking), the ethical dilemmas faced in participating in state executions and his own account of negotiating his salary with the chair of surgery at the Brigham's make for riveting reading and force us all as doctors to confront and reflect on our own experiences.

However, it is in the final section "Ingenuity" that Dr Gawande truly deserves his reputation as a "writer with a scalpel pen and X-ray eyes". Describing the compelling story behind Apgar scoring and the public reporting of cystic fibrosis outcomes by medical centres, Dr Gawande convinces in three short essays what hospital managers have spent decades trying to persuade doctors to adopt – standardisation and outcomes measuring. There are few books that I would urge everyone to read, and this book is one of them. Doctors questioning the need for the incessant calls for quality improvement and more importantly searching for ways to implement improvement initiatives well are especially encouraged to read the essays on "Keeping Score" and "The Bell Curve". ■