

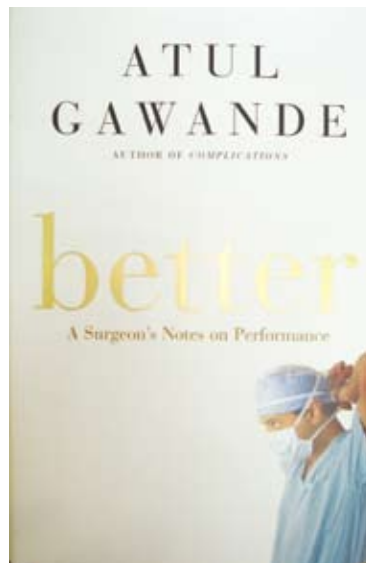
By Dr Hsu Li Yang, Editorial Board Member

Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance

Better is Dr Atul Gawande's second book of medical vignettes, written in his characteristic limpid prose. It is essentially a compilation of essays that have been published in the *New Yorker* and *Slate*, where Gawande is a staff writer. The underlying theme is that of betterment – of closing the gap between intentions and performance in the medical arena. Gawande's take is that success in medicine requires four core requirements: diligence, moral rectitude, ingenuity, and the will to always fight. These requirements are illustrated in a series of stories in which the author's experiences are seamlessly interwoven with carefully researched and reconstructed events, ranging from the modern history of polio eradication to military medical support in the Iraq War.

One of the attractions of the book is that no topic seems to be out of bounds for discussion. With the same candor, evenhandedness and insightfulness, Gawande examines the failure of doctors and healthcare staff to consistently wash their hands (resulting in the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria), the issue of litigation and malpractice in US medicine, physician salaries and their complicity in rising healthcare costs, and the matter of physicians participating in executions. Every side of these issues is given a voice, and although the author's stance is explicitly clear (except in the matter of his own remuneration), it is never preached or forced down the reader's throat as the one correct viewpoint.

It is difficult to pick a favorite story among the many. They are all compellingly written, with the lessons illuminated at a depth of examination that is rare in works of a similar nature. But I rather suspect that all doctors will find within the



book stories that resonate with each of them – instances that remind them of their clinical practice, and yet shed light on a hitherto unconsidered perspective. And that is the true genius of Gawande and *Better*.

In my case, I must confess to harbouring some of the usual snooty biases physicians seem to possess with regards to the general medical acumen (and intelligence) of their obstetric colleagues. Nonetheless, *Better* has made me realise with a sense of humility that no treatment or intervention in my specialty has come anywhere close to saving lives as reliably as the work that is practised on a daily basis by these same obstetric colleagues. The story of cystic fibrosis management and how the Minnesota Cystic Fibrosis Center achieves better treatment results than other centers (despite using practically the same treatment algorithms) was also particularly illuminating – we doctors are now focused on improving individual skill and knowledge, and as groups we (attempt to) practise evidence-based medicine and follow established guidelines. Yet it is a combination of aggressiveness, diligence, and ingenuity – traits seldom brought up in 'polite company' or during specialty training – that seem to make a huge difference in patient outcomes.

Although I initially read this book only because I had to interview Dr Gawande – flipping pages feverishly in a corner of Borders bookshop 40 minutes prior to said interview – I have since read it again at a more leisurely pace. *Better* is definitely worth the read, and it would not be a great surprise if this book were to be more critically and commercially acclaimed than *Complications*, the author's first book. ■