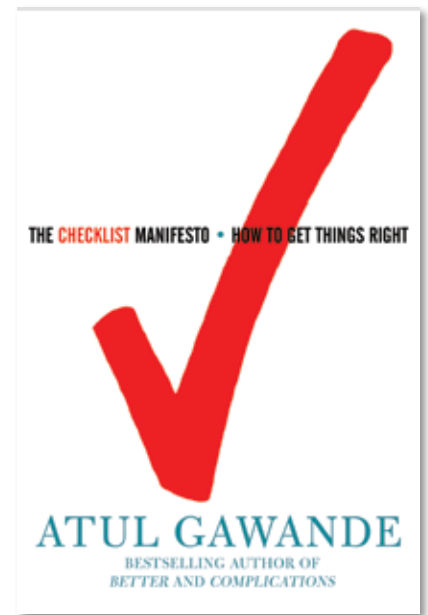


Checklist Evangelist

Book Review: The Checklist Manifesto – How To Get Things Right

By Dr Hsu Li Yang, Editorial Board Member



Atul Gawande is a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) in Boston (a "super-specialist" – in his own words – in cancers of the endocrine glands) and Associate Professor at both Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health. A couple of years ago, I reviewed his second book *Better* (and obtained an autographed copy of that book for doctor-blogger "Spacefan"), and had the good fortune of interviewing him in his corner office at BWH. This is his third book.

Unlike his first two books, which comprised medical vignettes highlighting different aspects of healthcare with occasionally no clear solution to bridging the gap between intention and performance, the central theme of this book is about the humble checklist and how its adoption may help to reduce avoidable errors in healthcare. In his characteristic lucid and engaging prose, he emphasised the mounting complexity of healthcare and how the traditional solutions of healthcare professionals (super-specialisation, more high-tech equipment) are less and less able to cope successfully with preventable errors (or may indeed be contributing to them). In contrast, several other industries – including the now-famous example of the aviation industry – have adopted checklists to address the situation.

The standard response of most healthcare professionals (especially doctors) has been that the human body is not an aircraft or building. But by the skillful use of examples, Gawande showed that equal if not greater complexity is involved in other fields, such as in the building of skyscrapers. He also described instances of dramatic success with the use of medical checklists, such as Peter Pronovost's phenomenal success in reducing vascular catheter-related infections in the intensive care setting, as well as the World Health Organisation surgical checklist that he had been instrumental in conceiving and had championed. This particular checklist has been tested in multiple hospitals in a variety of settings, both resource-poor and rich. The results have been dramatic (leading to an *New England Journal of Medicine* publication) in terms of improvement in clinical outcomes. Importantly, the majority

(80%) of surgeons and healthcare professionals who had been sceptical at the project's inception supported its use at the end.

More importantly, 93% voted that they would want the checklist to be used if they themselves required surgery.

This book is not proselytising in its advocacy of checklists in medicine. Gawande has taken pains to elaborate on when they can help and when they can't, and crucially, what it takes to create a functional checklist (lots of work and trials in real world settings; lists from deskbound pen-pushers generally fail at the first test). He has also defined two different types of checklists, the first of which we are more familiar with – checkboxes for "action tasks". The second type is conceptually more powerful – checkboxes for "communication tasks" – the point of which is to bring people of different skill sets and roles together to brainstorm if unexpected circumstances arise during the implementation of complex jobs.

The potential of checklists in improving medical care is tremendous and cannot be denied. We already use them to a certain extent, perhaps without even realising it (temperature charts, clerking notes, and so on. Nurses have almost exhaustive checklists for different situations). The author's point is that more checklists can be developed and deployed for complex care, and critically, checklists are more about culture and mindsets rather than just a set of plain checkboxes. The medical profession is perhaps overdue for a change in mentality over how healthcare should be delivered. This book is highly recommended for those in the healthcare profession. **SMA**



Dr Hsu Li Yang is currently based at the older medical school in Singapore, where his preoccupation with drug-proof bugs prevents a closer acquaintance with worms and other fields of interest.