

★ **Gawande, Atul**

*BETTER: A Surgeon's Notes
on Performance*

Metropolitan/Henry Holt

(288 pp.)

\$24.00

CD \$29.95

Apr. 3, 2007

ISBN: 0-8050-8211-5

CD 1-4272-0098-X

“What does it take to be good at something, when failure is so easy?” asks writer/physician Gawande in his follow-up to *Complications* (2002).

Diligence, ingenuity and “doing right,” he answers. Gawande illustrates each of these qualities with stories from his own experience, as well as his observations of and conversations with other physicians. Being diligent about the simple act of hand-washing dramatically reduces hospital infections, he demonstrates, and through diligence, army surgeons in Baghdad have greatly enhanced the survival rate among casualties in Iraq. The section on doing right tackles such troublesome moral issues as whether doctors should participate in executions and at what point treatment of a patient becomes mistreatment and should be stopped. Discussing ingenuity, Gawande shows how the rating scale devised by Virginia Apgar, neither an obstetrician nor a mother, transformed the practice of obstetrics. A similar rating scale for every medical encounter, he believes, would inform patients and improve the performance of doctors and hospitals. He lauds the innovative thinking of Don Berwick, head of the Institute for Health Care Improvement, who is challenging the medical profession to measure and compare the performance of doctors and hospitals and to give patients total access to that information. When such information is available, medical professionals can identify the best performance and learn from it, as Gawande illustrates with an account of exceptional results in treating cystic fibrosis at Babies and Children’s Hospital in Cleveland. Monitoring and improving clinical performance would do more to save lives than advances in laboratory knowledge, he contends. For young doctors wondering how they can make an individual difference, Gawande suggests five strategies: Ask unscripted questions, don’t complain, “count something” (be a scientist as well as a doctor), write something (to make yourself part of a larger world) and change in response to new ideas.

A must-read for medical professionals—and a discerning, humanizing portrait of doctors at work for the rest of us.

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