

# FOUR HUMOURS

## Uncertainty Behind the Operating Curtain: “Complications: A Surgeon’s Notes on an Imperfect Science”

Atul Gawande, MD. Picador; 2008

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Anton Fomenko

Class of 2013, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University

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Medicine is often a bipolar profession. Successful treatments and procedures are applauded and cures are met with emphatic hurrahs. Yet too often, the unsteady hand trembles over an incision; the indecisive mind ponders the complex diagnosis; the conscience anguishes over a patient’s fate. These uncertainties, all too familiar to those in the healthcare field, are brilliantly illuminated in Gawande’s *Complications*. This collection of fourteen essays probes skillfully, yet humbly, into the dynamic life of a surgical resident working in a busy Bostonian hospital. Gawande will captivate lay audiences, medical trainees, and physicians alike by managing to be a surgical diary, heart-racing drama, and mystery novel all at once, enticing the reader to stay up reading into the wee hours of the night.

Gawande’s loom spins vivid tales of a young surgeon’s shocking encounters with unusual medical conditions, typically unseen by most students of medicine. These range from the relatively benign, as in a woman’s struggle with chronic blushing (“The Crimson Tide”), to an adolescent’s brush with death at the mercy of flesh-eating bacteria (“The Case of the Red Leg”). Gawande’s imagery is sharp, much like his scalpel, and immerses the reader into the visceral intimacy of disease:

*Objectively, the rash had the exact appearance of cellulitis, something antibiotics would take care of. But another possibility lodged in my mind now, one that scared the hell out of me ... The disease was grossly visible now. In her foot and most of her calf, the outer, fascial layer of her muscles was gray and dead. A brownish dishwater fluid was seeping out with a faint smell of decay.*

The captivating stories and characters are threaded with a look at the history of medical practices and surgical culture. The history of autopsy is examined, from its beginnings as a taboo art to its rise as a controlled scientific investigation crucial to establishing aetiology of disease. When issues of choice are discussed, the

feathers of modern readers may be ruffled at hearing that urologists only forty years ago would refuse to perform vasectomies on the basis of patient age or marital status. Gawande manages to squeeze the politics, economics, and discoveries of surgery in between his narratives, so as not to drone or bore.

A recurring theme of *Complications* is medical error. To most, mistakes in the healthcare field are unseen, and consequently their frequency is underestimated and their cause misunderstood. Of particular poignancy to medical trainees is the author’s own experience in accepting responsibility for an emergency tracheostomy gone wrong:

*The day after the disaster, [my attending] Ball had caught me in the hall and taken me aside. His voice was more wounded than angry as he went through my specific failures ... Even after Ball had gone down the fluorescent-lit hallway, I felt a sense of shame like a burning ulcer ... And yet I also knew that a surgeon can take such feelings too far. It is one thing to be aware of one’s limitations. It is another to be plagued by self-doubt.*

Ultimately, Gawande acknowledges the paradoxical predicament of surgeons: human beings often faced with seemingly inhuman challenges and responsibilities. Through prose, medical errors are revealed to be an unavoidable by-product of medical training, which is necessary to ensure a future generation of skilled professionals.

Whether readers pick up *Complications* for the ideas it raises or the tales it concocts, they will delight in peering through Gawande’s wide lens. Through the seemingly disconnected essays, a subtle pattern emerges: the heartbeat of a young aspiring surgeon.

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