

Atul Gawande  
**COMPLICATIONS**

A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science

"Perfectly captures the wonder and fearful responsibility that come with cutting people open in the hope of making them whole again."  
*Hill Bryson*



**'Complications. A surgeon's notes on an imperfect science. Atul Gawande. Profile Books 2002 £12.99 Hardback 269 pages**

*'Atul Gawande offers an unflinching view from the scalpel's edge, where science is ambiguous, information is limited, the stakes are high, yet decisions must be made'* says the blurb on the inside dust jacket. Whilst I would shy away from a description so melodramatic, it is a truly compelling book and the title says it all. Gawande writes exceptionally well and explains in exemplary detail the failings of medicine, and

surgery in particular, to live up to the expectations of the public who wish for us to be practitioners of a science not an art. The author describes cases and scenarios we would all recognise: of being found wanting in knowledge, skill or application, of acting on a hunch rather than the objectivity of a blood result or radiological abnormality and of quite simply getting it wrong. He writes with an honesty - and humour - uncharacteristic of the far side of the Atlantic pond as he describes his own surgical talents as '*... neither gifted nor maladroit. With practice and more practice, I get the hang of it.*' All surgeons know these words to be true but few of us tell our patients that, let alone put it in international print!

He relentlessly discusses his own failings and mistakes as well as many other members of the profession but in doing so he exposes the myth of medical perfection that the public yearn for and we know to be an unachievable nirvana. Gawande goes on to present several cases in which medical knowledge is far outweighed by the depths of our ignorance (chronic pain and severe blushing are two examples) and examines how we as a profession deal with our patients when we don't what is going on. For the interested reader there is an extensive list of references at the back of the book to read further about the topics he discusses.

I find this book a fascinatingly honest account of what most of us know and never admit and as such recommend it to any doctor who feels they have got to a stage in their career where they are confident about their practice - the introversion it demands is humbling. As for what a patient would think about the revelations herein, who knows? But perhaps if it were required reading for all, then many of the unrealistic expectations of patients and their families that we know we cannot meet would be ameliorated. Gawande has recently published the successor to 'Complications' called 'Better: a Surgeons Notes on performance' and which promises to be an equally uncomfortable read.

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If you would like to submit a literary review for consideration please contact me by e-mail at paulantonyhunt@doctors.org.uk. Submissions should be no more than 500 words and must include the full details of the title, author, publisher and an ISBN number.