Gently dismantling the myth of medical infallibility, Dr. Atul Gawandes Complications: A Surgeons Notes on an Imperfect Science is essential reading for anyone involved in medicine--on either end of the stethoscope. Medical professionals make mistakes, learn on the job, and improvise much of their technique and self-confidence. Gawandes tales are humane and passionate reminders that doctors are people, too. His prose is thoughtful and deeply engaging, shifting from sometimes painful stories of suffering patients (including his own child) to intriguing suggestions for improving medicine with the same care he expresses in the surgical theater. Some of his ideas will make health care providers nervous or even angry, but his disarming style, confessional tone, and thoughtful arguments should win over most readers. Complications is a book with heart and an excellent bedside manner, celebrating rather than berating doctors for being merely human. --Rob Lightner

My Personal Review:
Complications, by Dr. Atul Gawande is a very gutsy and honest discussion about medicine in general, and surgeons in particular. The book is also unique, for unlike others of its type it is written by a surgeon that is starting his career, and not looking back upon it. I would imagine that the book caused some consternation amongst his peers. The book does nothing to minimize the skills and accomplishments of the men and women who can reach in to the body and do some pretty spectacular work. The book does portray them as human beings that come with all the normal traits that any of us do. The pressure they must deal with is that when they make a mistake, it can irreparably harm or cause the death of the patient they are trying to help.
The vast majority of careers that people practice does not involve decisions that can cause the outcomes I mention above. And few occupations require of their practitioners near perfection, that if not
delivered has a major legal industry prepared to hammer them with lawsuits. Incompetent or negligent doctors should be punished and removed from practice, but what about a human error, or a doctor that makes every single decision that is correct and appropriate for the patient he or she sees, and misses the 1 in 250,000 cases where doing everything correctly can cause a patient to die. The final chapter of this book deals with exactly those type of odds. Whether those odds are beaten often depends on the instincts of the physician. And these intuitive feelings they may or may not act upon are certainly helped by experience, but younger doctors without the years that familiarity brings can often make a decision largely because they are so new. Dr. Gawande makes clear that all the sophisticated technology available does not replace the one on one interaction with the patient.

If we ever need a surgeon we want a person we perceive as experienced, a person we are literally willing to risk our health and our lives with. The problem is that virtually no one wants to be part of a new surgeon learning his craft even with very experienced surgeons standing right at the table, watching and even directing the path the surgery takes. Dr. Gawande also shares his feelings when his children are ill and the contradictions he deals with as a parent, even as he is often on the other side with people judging him and his youth.

The statistics say that a surgeon will make a given mistake once every 200 times he or she performs a surgery that is described in the book, and that is also fairly common. If the mistake is made the results range from terrible to potentially terminal. The author does a great job of sharing what it feels like to be told that you will make the mistake, that doing the task 99.5% of the time without error can still cost a life.

A person who decides to become a general surgeon will study and practice until their mid 30s before they are able to operate on their own. That type of commitment is rare, and recent articles have said that less men and women are willing to devote that much of their lives before beginning their chosen career.

We want these people to be perfect when it is either we, or someone we care about that is to be operated on. They are not perfect, although those that are excellent can statistically come very near perfection. I would trust Dr. Gawande for he is a man that is clearly skilled, but is also acutely aware of how fine a line he walks every moment of his day.

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