

Book Review

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Being Mortal

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For most of human history the average life expectancy was less than 40 years and “old people” were rare. The last 200 years has seen dramatic developments in technology and a radical change in the human condition. The number of “old people” is increasing and in many industrialised nations people over the age of 60 years account for around 20 per cent of the population. With urbanisation and industrialisation and increasing empowerment of women, nuclear families are becoming the norm and providing care for the elderly within the family setting is becoming difficult.

Dr Atul Gawande is a surgeon, a professor at Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health, and a bestselling author. His new book, *Being Mortal*, examines old age, death, and mortality. In industrialised nations the elderly often spend the last years of their life in retirement homes, nursing homes, and hospitals. Dr Gawande, who is of Indian origin, describes how his grandfather spent the last years of his life living with his extended family. However, even in the developing world extended families are becoming less common. The author mainly describes the situation in the United States (US) and in the first three chapters he focuses on the sterile, regimented atmosphere existing in nursing homes and intensive care units (ICU). Drawing on case stories from both his professional and personal life, the author weaves a poignant picture of how advancing years and failing body function condemn the elderly to an increasingly limited existence and robs them of “life”.

He describes assisted living facilities which have sprung up in the US in the last three decades offering the elderly the privacy of a home along with assistance with daily living and medical and nursing care, if and when required. The first

assisted living facility was started in the 1980s by academician Keren Wilson and her husband in the state of Oregon. The author skilfully weaves insights from the literature about the psychology of a dying person with case histories in his book. A person who is aware that they have only a limited time to live undergoes a change in priorities. Spending time with family and friends, settling one’s affairs, and establishing one’s legacy become important. The irony is that admission to a nursing home or hospital deprives the individual of the company of family and friends, which seems so important to them during their final days.

The author describes home care and hospice care, which are becoming increasingly common in the developed world. As doctors we have been educated to preserve life at all costs and consider death as the enemy. Death is inevitable and the author questions whether we should continue fighting the enemy regardless of the cost and even when it leads to our total annihilation. Maintaining the health of the elderly requires a continuum of care and is often difficult and taxing both physically and mentally for both the patient and caregivers. The number of geriatricians is decreasing in the US and elsewhere, which the author mainly attributes to the lower median income of doctors in this specialty.

The author also highlights the importance of “hard conversations” with the dying so that the family, care givers, and healthcare professionals are aware of the patients’ priorities during their last days, what kind of risks and compromises are acceptable to them, and the trade-offs they are willing to make to be alive.

Dr Gawande concludes with his description of his father’s struggle with a spinal cord tumour and how the illness gradually resulted in weakness of his hands and legs. He describes poignantly the challenge of administering the exact amount of pain medicine to his father—the dose numbed the pain but at the same time did not result in grogginess and drowsiness.

Being Mortal deals with issues that are becoming increasingly important the world over. Developed nations are struggling with the rising cost of health care while in the developing world universal health care of good quality is not always available. In India, many families struggle to pay hefty medical bills and medical expenses have been cited as an important reason pushing families into poverty. The author describes his visit to a charity-run old age home in the outskirts of Delhi, and the depressing condition of the elderly.

The author writes in an easy and informal style and I enjoyed reading the book. *Being Mortal* will be of special interest to doctors, other health professionals, health planners, and policy makers.

About the book:

Atul Gawande. *Being Mortal*. Metropolitan Mooks, New York, United States of America. 2014. ISBN 978-0-8050-9515-9.

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