

Direct Red: A Surgeon's View of her Life or Death Profession. By Gabriel Weston. Collins, 2009. 208 pages. R323,12.

We all study medicine for a reason. Sometimes at three in the morning after the fifth incision and drainage or gunshot laparotomy it is not easy to remember why, but once there was a reason. For most of us the reasons we enjoy medicine and practise surgery have changed over the years, and are not something many surgeons muse over to any degree. It's a job, it's a good and interesting job, and for most of us it is a passion.

It is refreshing then that Gabriel Weston took time to consider her life as a training surgeon, from internship to ENT specialisation, and share her thoughts and reminiscences. In *Direct Red* she uses 14 short episodes with different themes to present the common situations every trainee has been in. Her prose allows space and hindsight to colour each story, revealing in the mundane of hospital business a beauty and a poetry: of life and death, of decisions made well or poorly, of lives changed and mistakes lived with.

Throughout the book Weston holds a mirror up to her readers, allowing them to re-experience their own surgical memories. The book opens with a diatribe on slowness and ineptitude, as she watches a senior surgeon kill a patient through inability and pride, while she as an intern can only assist, incapable of doing better. Another surgeon finally comes to clamp the iliac vessels, but the patient dies in the ICU the next day.

In another case, further into her training, she remembers the odd collection of emotions that surround a death on table from a ruptured aortic aneurysm: *'... when at four in the morning the consultant announced there was no more he could do, my main feeling was relief. The hours in theatre had piled up against the thirty minutes or so I had spent with Mr Cooke in A&E, so that my short connection with him felt out of date ... any sense of sentiment I might have had had been eclipsed ... I was just tired and my arms hurt from holding the retractor for so long.'*

This honesty is far removed from the surgical corridors of television and fiction, where every patient teaches the doctor

a valuable life lesson, and each death a personal agonising moment of failure.

Weston observes the place of compassion in surgery: the balance between caring for the patient's welfare in order to treat them while remaining detached from personal emotion, and caring for the patient by investing emotion and concern in them as an individual. As doctors we grow used to constantly walking the fine line between the two sides, sometimes falling more one way or the other, but it is a concept difficult for non-medical people to comprehend fully, given their diet of TV doctors loving too much, and real-life hospital doctors caring too little.

There are also great moments of light relief, such as Weston's account of her first male catheterisation, carried out in a packed theatre full of others gathered there to enjoy the embarrassment and humiliation of her trial ('no penis, all foreskin, the task seemed impossible ...'). Throughout the book she also uses her familiarity with English literature to bring a depth and poetry to her practice. Hers is a world where Virgil and Shakespeare give the frames of reference to help her understand her experiences, and patients are mysteries to be solved like an Agatha Christie novel.

As the book goes on it seems almost a cathartic venture with little thought to who the reader should be, or how they would understand her world. Weston is meticulous in describing the theory of diathermy, but on the same page describes the fasciculation of the tongue and the vitalisation of a radial forearm skin paddle, concepts that would be far harder for a lay person to appreciate. So in the end this is a surgical memoir, written for us in the profession to enjoy and perhaps allow remembrance of our own personal halls of medical fame: those of our patients we carry with us and remember long after the patient is cured or (more often) has died. It is also a book to be given to those who surround us, to help them experience some of the situations and emotions of our daily lives we often cannot articulate, but which Gabriel Weston has now done so beautifully and eloquently for us.

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