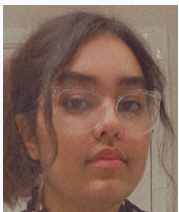


# LEARNING FROM THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE



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In December of 2016, Dr. Atul Gawande, surgeon and professor at Harvard Medical School, sat down with the CEO of the American Association of Medical Colleges, Darrell G. Kirch. The pair discussed where the future of health care was headed. Though the interview happened in 2016, Gawande’s vision of the health care system and how it should operate still applies today. He talked about two main aspects of the health care industry that he believes will change: information processing and staff community of a hospital. All the points made in this interview are as relevant as ever, and we have seen many of them happen in the last year.

According to reference website Worldometers, there are currently 127,900,420 COVID-19 cases around the world. While the mortality rate has been increasing, we should also acknowledge the fact that among those cases, 103,081,845 people have recovered completely. This was made possible by our hardworking doctors, nurses and hospital staff that have been laboring around the clock, and the abundance of essential health care workers worldwide.

2020 has been one of the toughest years

for people in these careers. We have seen their resilience, strength and willpower in ensuring each person gets the best health care. However, this pandemic has also uncovered some faults in the health care industry, including inadequate access, rising costs of insurance and poor treatment of hospital staff. Despite all these conditions, we witnessed immense dedication and diligence during the pandemic. Due to their perseverance and care, health care workers deserve positive and productive changes to their field. In their 2016 discussion, Gawande and Kirch provided a road map for how to help the people who we call heroes. First, Gawande emphasized the type of information that should be used for diagnosis. We all know our physical information is always the most prominent—our blood pressure, thyroid levels and immunizations records can all be measured or calculated in the office. But what about the things that cannot be measured or seen, such as our mental health, family upbringing or socioeconomic status? This psychosocial information is just as important.

Gawande believes that “the amount of data that actually matters will only get larger. We will discover how it’s not just their high blood pressure or cholesterol level that matters, but how lonely they are or what kind of family environment they are in.” During the pandemic, many of us witnessed this firsthand.



In a research article from *The Lancet*, it was found that due to the pandemic, many undiagnosed mental health conditions were increasing, and more prescriptions were given to patients because of these conditions. When I had a doctor's appointment last year, they focused on my mental well-being as well as physical health. It felt very new. My doctor gave me resources on how to cope with anxiety during uncertain times.

Gawande was right in hypothesizing that health care is driven by information; the recognition of mental health's impact on physical health has led to an increase in our health care information pool during COVID-19. Additionally, since everything is increasingly digitized, it will be much easier for our future physicians to store and categorize clinical and psychological information about a patient.

Gawande secondly suggested improvement to health care involves what he thinks will change the way the industry operates. Hospitals are still currently hierarchical; there is a head person who gives orders to everyone else. However, the recent increase in medical school applications is hinting toward the fact that more people will be joining the health care industry, and will have to work in teams to provide the best care possible.

Gawande states, "Just as in the operating room, we are teams of equals having to pull around our patient, not the surgeon's patient," meaning it takes collaboration from multiple health care workers to help someone. In the complex health care systems we have around the world, fostering teamwork is essential for patients. It minimizes many potential errors that occur when only one person is handling a patient. It also makes the patient more relaxed knowing they are in the hands of several experts who are ready to help them at any time. We need better supportive, familial communities of healthcare staff.

This is a very important change that I believe will be relevant even 10 years into the future. Instead of working like a business, health care officials will have to work in effective teams. These teams, according to Amir Babiker in the *Sudanese Journal of Paediatrics*, will allow all members,

including patients, to communicate properly, share their observations and come to the best decisions that optimize the patients' care.

To recap, Gawande recommends big improvements to information processing and staff communities in medicine. Healthcare workers will be most helped by these changes, because they currently have tiring conditions. Improvements to the system are improvements to the system's administrators. Patients will also benefit. The standard of healthcare will increase, giving patients a peace of mind as they know they are in good hands.

These changes need to be made for the benefit of both parties: patients and providers. Health care workers need to have improved work conditions so they can provide the best health care to people in need. If we had already implemented these, then we would have been a bit more prepared for COVID-19. These changes will help us during this pandemic, as well as any future unprecedented times.

Given our circumstances, we need to think about the future and learn from our mistakes in the past. Our health care workers had to adapt and change in the face of this adversity, and we have to make these changes now so that we can ensure they are not overworked again. If implemented, Gawande's suggestions for change will cause our standard of health care to go up, as well as our empathy and compassion through holistic health care. When it comes to our health care's future, sometimes it helps to look to the past.

