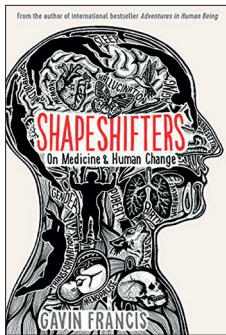


Life & Times Books

Shapeshifters: On Medicine and Human Change

Gavin Francis

Wellcome Collection, 2018, HB, 282pp,
£16.99, 978-1781257739



THE ART AND THE MYSTERY

'The very essence of being human is change' says Gavin Francis. In this wonderfully readable book he sets about illustrating this point using a broad variety of historical and literary references interwoven with tales from his own life as a GP.

The chapters are a series of short essays on life's changes and transitions from conception to death, via puberty, body-building, gender, pregnancy, tattoos, menopause, and many others.

Our state of 'perpetual metamorphosis' is a fascinating theme for any reader. For those of us who work in general practice there are many moments that may prompt pause for thought. He delves into the historical and metaphysical contexts of familiar consultations in a way that we seldom have the opportunity to do in our time-pressured working days.

Describing an elderly gentleman with dementia and delirium Francis discusses how memory and identity are profound concepts, grappled with by figures from Homer to Schrödinger.

A chapter about sleep reflects upon the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* through to Freud. These meditations often lead to nuggets of clinical relevance. As Francis puts it:

'Work as a physician takes advantage of those changes that aid us and tries to slow down those that would constrain us.'

There is a sense of enthusiasm and

wonder in his writing that is infectious. He is a celebrant of holism. Iona Heath wrote in *The Mystery of General Practice* that:

'All aspects of human existence are legitimate concerns of the general practitioner'.¹

This book epitomises that sentiment.

At a time of uncertainty and angst for the NHS the positive tone is welcome. There has been no shortage of medical memoirs in recent months (Adam Kay's *This is Going to Hurt*, Caroline Elton's *Also Human*) and *Shapeshifters* certainly falls at the more uplifting end of the spectrum.

If there could be any criticism levelled at this book then it is that at times the scope is so ambitious that complex topics such as gender reassignment are covered with a brevity that could seem reductive, even glib. However, there is such compassion and humility in his writing that this is easily forgiven.

The core strength of this book is its humanity. The author's rare skill is that of bringing a broad range of influences and disciplines seamlessly together, which could perhaps serve as an apt analogy for the art, and the mystery, of general practice itself.

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1. Heath I. *The mystery of general practice*. London: Nuffield Trust, 1995. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/the-mystery-of-general-practice> (accessed 5 Jul 2018).

Migrant Architects of the NHS: South Asian Doctors and the Reinvention of British General Practice (1940s–1980s)

Julian M Simpson

Manchester University Press, 2018, HB,
336pp, £75.00, 978-1784991302



TRAILBLAZERS

This book is based on a scholarly thesis, but is accessible to a wider readership. It aims to offer a new perspective on the history of immigration and a better understanding of how Britain's imperial past and South Asian migrants have contributed to shaping modern Britain and the NHS. Archival evidence, photographs, and 45 individual accounts of personal aspirations, ambitions, and struggles take the reader from British India to the establishment of the NHS and the reinvention of general practice.

Simpson begins with a consideration of the link between the dismantling of 'Empire' and Britain's post-war health care. With no official government policy to specifically recruit migrant GPs to unpopular and deprived industrial and mining towns, the book reveals how these doctors conveniently slipped into their roles in general practice and avoided a major NHS recruitment crisis.

Simpson makes a complex connection between imperial legacy, the arrival of South Asian migrants in significant numbers, the openly discriminating regulation of British medicine, and the wide social acceptance the migrants received, explaining how and why in some areas South Asian GPs accounted for up to 50% of the GP workforce. The evidence produced is remarkable. Interestingly, he includes in his conclusion the surprise that none of those interviewed specifically entered Britain to become a GP.

Simpson comments that:

'If India was the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, the jewel in the crown of the NHS (general practice) was dependent on medical labour from the former Raj.'

Reasoning that the research is not a celebration of migrants or of the NHS's reliance on them, it is a critical appraisal offering a new perspective on the history of the NHS. They left countries that needed them, came with their own prejudices, and, like other non-migrant GPs, some pioneered, some became activists, and some endured the margins. It is, however, a celebration of historical inclusion and contributes to future thinking about the history of the NHS.

For me, it had the additional effect of being a personal narrative. Unintendedly emotional, I became lost in thought at some parts. The oral studies uncover many who were essentially 'Midnight's Children' and who were primarily trained in British colleges in immediate post-colonial India.

I remember my late father telling me how he read George Bernard Shaw and, while a medical student in India, was impatient to see the new film *My Fair Lady*. This, among other memoirs, echoes throughout the book. Unlike the children in the book who may have been deterred by watching their parents' struggles in general practice, I witnessed firsthand the doctor-patient contact that inspired me to follow my South Asian GP father.

This book should be read by anyone interested in the contribution to British medicine made by NHS doctors from overseas, and adds to previous historical work on medical migration and the after-effects of Empire.

Easy to follow and highly recommended, Julian Simpson's book provides a clear and comprehensive account of this suddenly very topical slice of history, and does exactly what he set out to do — writes migrants back into the history of the NHS.

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MIGRANTS WHO MADE THE NHS: RCGP EXHIBITION

A fascinating exhibition 'Migrants who made the NHS' has been installed on the ground floor of the RCGP, and runs until December 2018. It provides striking background information and displays about the staffing crisis in general practice when, in the wake of the Collings Report on general practice in England in 1950 and in the face of massive over-investment in hospital medicine, there was an exodus of British GPs to countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. There are dramatic displays depicting the appalling racial discrimination faced by these doctors, particularly women, and some equally moving accounts of how these adversities were overcome.

Many of the new Asian GPs were great innovators — they built state-of-the-art health centres, and the first ever GP cooperative was established in Bolton in 1976. Outside the surgery many Asian GPs became active and prominent in local and national civic and medical politics, including the foundation of the Overseas Doctors Association and work in the RCGP.

The debt that we owe them for resuscitating general practice at a time of peril is immense.

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