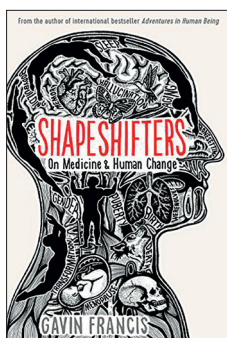


# Life & Times Books

## 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'.<sup>1</sup>*

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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### REFERENCE

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.