



## Blood, Sweat & Tears: Becoming a Better Surgeon

By Philip F Stahel

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### Blood, Sweat & Tears: Becoming a Better Surgeon By Philip F Stahel

All surgeons want to be better surgeons...They work hard to be respected by their peers, appreciated by their patients, and valued by their communities. Most of the estimated 200 million surgeries performed worldwide every year go as anticipated, with positive patient outcomes. However, the number of surgical complications and preventable medical errors still remains unacceptably high. Why are experienced surgeons still creating so many adverse events? More importantly, what can surgeons do to better address the situation? This book seeks to answer these questions. The book provides pragmatic examples on how good surgeons can grow from being technically brilliant to becoming empathetic and capable of providing safe, compassionate, and more effective patient care. The book follows trauma surgeon Philip Stahel's 20-year journey from his 'rookie years' in internship and residency, to his development as a global patient safety advocate, renowned academician and teacher, and compassionate surgeon. The book touches on why our current patient safety protocols and checklists fail to keep patients safe and how a physician-driven initiative with credible leadership is needed to build a sustainable 'culture of patient safety'. Written for a wide audience and based on the paradigm that "good judgment comes from experience which comes from poor judgment," the book provides in-depth coverage of all the critical and timely components of safe surgical care, relates practical tips for improving the quality of partnerships between surgeons and patients, and offers a practical guide on how to reduce the learning curve to becoming a better surgeon.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

*Blood, Sweat & Tears: How to Become a Better Surgeon* is a remarkable book that emphasizes empathy and communication, provocatively authored by a surgeon. However, as the reader will soon discover, Philip Stahel is not your ordinary surgeon. I strongly recommend every health care provider read this book. I further recommend this book be mandatory reading annually for every medical student, intern, resident and fellow-in-training, most especially chapters 3 and 4, which epitomize William Osler's advice, "Listen to the patient - he is telling you the diagnosis". In these 20 chapters, the many other insightful quotes alone are worth the purchase price.

Jerome M. Buckley, MD  
Retired CEO/Chairman, COPIC Companies  
Associate Clinical Professor, University of Colorado School of Medicine

The life of a surgeon is difficult. Life and limb threatening problems do not necessarily occur at convenient times. Surgery is not for the weak as it requires physical strength, emotional stamina, and unquenchable intellectual curiosity. Underneath these prerequisites lies the most important of all surgical requirements: the patient. With his emphasis on patient care found through empathy, shared decision making, and attention to detail, Dr. Stahel is telling the surgeon of today and tomorrow about the way to quality improvement and self-fulfillment.

The emphasis on *empathy* is a crucial but neglected part of quality improvement. Why do our patients so frequently not adhere to our instructions? Putting yourself in the patient's position creates an essential surgeon-patient bond that underlies an optimal outcome. Dr. Stahel did not write the golden rule of "love thy neighbor as thyself", but it is clear that he sees this as an essential part of the surgeon-patient partnership. Both surgeon and patient will feel this effect, and it will pay dividends for both parties in the near and distant future.

It is an important but disturbing reflection that many medical students lose their empathetic qualities during their clerkship years. There are many reasons that underlie this loss including our role models, the frantic pace of clinical activities, and the lack of clear direction as to the medical student role. Importantly, Dr. Stahel gives us a path to finding our empathy by rediscovering our humanism. Relating to the janitor, the nurse, and other members of the care team as people is an important first step in understanding the common ground that we share with our patients. Letting each member of the surgical team call the professor by his first name clearly tells the staff that all are important and essential. Giving his phone number to his patients shows the trust that Dr. Stahel shares with those who trust him.

As I reflect upon my own 35-year career in surgery, I remember the eagerness with which I first approached operating room days. "A chance to cut is a chance to cure" and "the only way to heal is with cold steel" were chants that my fellow residents and I would often repeat. The operating room was its own sanctuary away from many realities of patient care. With time, I have learned to appreciate other parts of patient care. In the clinic, I have a chance to know the patient as a person, and I have an opportunity to educate the patient as I

would want to be educated.

My path to becoming a better surgeon is far from over but my time to accomplish this is short. I truly wish that I had read such a book many decades ago as I began my life in surgery, but back then no such work was available. With *Blood, Sweat, & Tears*, Dr. Stahel has directed me to some needed tools that might help me reach this laudatory goal of ongoing quality improvement. I am most appreciative for his reflections and observations, and I remain hopeful that perhaps someday I might become a better surgeon.

Ted Clarke, MD

Orthopaedic Surgeon and CEO and Chairman of COPIC, Denver, Colorado

As a veteran Registered Nurse I feel that this book is a must read for anyone in health care!

Dr. Philip Stahel has a very down to Earth writing style and compassionate approach to patient care. Reading this book has reinvigorated my love of nursing and passion for patient care.

Kerry Olson, RN

*Blood, Sweat & Tears* is a unique book - clearly one of a kind, and surprisingly not just of interest to those who work in healthcare. The book has a captivating narrative flow and the medical aspects are very easy to understand for non-clinical/laypersons as well. I will be sending my "baby boomer" parents a copy as it is becoming increasingly important for the community to understand the complexity and challenges of our current healthcare system. My take-home point from this book is that we can and we should be involved in our healthcare choices and ask important and pertinent questions. If you're like me, and you're interested in patient safety and eventually receiving high quality medical care if you ever become a patient, if you have a sense of humor, and you would like a different perspective on healthcare, this is the book for you!

Nicole Morgan, MHA

From the Back Cover

I applaud Dr. Stahel for presenting a rich compilation of his honest and remarkable first-hand experiences and the collective work of doctors and health care leaders to reduce the endemic variation in medical quality that contributes to the #3 cause of death in the U.S. today--medical care itself.

Marty Makary, MD, MPH

Author of the New York Times bestseller, *Unaccountable*.

*Blood Sweat & Tears* is a great book, one of a kind and destined to be a medical classic. What makes the book exceptional is that the narrative is about a difficult human endeavor, often done imperfectly, by humans who have been told they should be 'perfect'. This quintessential paradox is why this book is a practical story about life and will likely be of interest and enjoyment to many outside the realm of medicine.

Wade Smith, MD

Co-founding Editor, *Patient Safety in Surgery*.

About the Author

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Colorado, USA; Professor of Orthopedics and Neurosurgery, University of Colorado (CU) School of Medicine, Colorado, USA; Editor-in-Chief, Patient Safety in Surgery.

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