

In defence of surgeons:

Premise - - -

Surgery is a technical skill

The development of technical skill is a creative endeavour

Therefore good surgeons are creative

25 years ago I was an operating theatre sister. Reflecting on the premise above I find myself associating creativity with imagination - -

Reflection one:

In my time as a sister it felt like the halcyon days of open heart surgery, still new enough to be innovative, but established enough to be relatively safe and well researched. Just one or two generations of surgeons before had needed huge risk taking attributes and bare faced recklessness to submerge deeply unconscious patients in baths of ice to bring the core temperature down and then operate on the heart at breakneck speed before the heart muscle died through lack of oxygen. Despite the advent of machinery that could bypass the heart the surgeons I worked with were still pushing the boundary - speed, dexterity and total accuracy were the benchmark - nothing less was good enough. 20 very fine, bright blue nylon stitches all fanning out from a newly inserted heart valve made a beautiful pattern, and signified the start of the patient's new lease in life. The theatre was often full of jazz, or whatever the surgeon fancied, and finished in water fights with surgical gloves filled with water and used as bombs.

Reflection two:

Emergency! A young woman casually accepts a life home from work on a colleagues motor bike -she only has sandals and jeans for protection but its not far - - A minor crash leaves her unprotected foot crushed beyond repair - he can remove the whole foot or try preserve what is left. The surgeon envisions her life post trauma and takes a risk - he does the least deforming surgery he can - using all his skill to ensure that the blood supply will be sufficient and that the wound is clean so infection cannot destroy his work. By doing this he leaves sufficient of her heel structure to give her a chance of maintaining her balance. I remember this surgeon using language to help him through this - he maintained a monologue as he interrogated himself and thought through his action plan and its justification.

Reflection three:

Beyond his time - A surgeon close to retirement continues to do a procedure that is not dangerous in itself, nor is it illegal, it's just no longer considered the best option. This procedure leaves an area of tissue behind that is prone to cancerous development which with a bit more skill and attention could be removed without loss to the patient. He has no interest in the patient - he does not see her as a person with a life ahead, he does not see the operation he is performing within the context of her whole self. He lacks both skill and imagination; for me he is an example of a non -creative surgeon.

Reflection four:

She comes into the operating theatre awake as the procedure is best performed with a local anaesthetic. She has severed the tendons in her hand with a kitchen knife. The correct procedure for this is soft tissue repair followed by a splint for 6 weeks to immobilise the hand. She is Asian; it is her left hand; she is 8 months pregnant; she has little English, and she's scared. The injury and this procedure are clearly only the beginning of her problems, but the main feeling from the surgeon is his displeasure at her lack of gratitude for his work. I still feel a bit angry with this surgeon, but should I judge him just on his technical skill, and leave imagination out of it?

