

Facts and ideas from anywhere



William C. Roberts, MD

APHORISMS AND QUOTATIONS FOR SURGEONS

In 2004, Dr. Moshe Schein published *Aphorisms & Quotations for the Surgeon* (1), which included some 1600 aphorisms and quotations. In 2008 he published *A Companion to Aphorisms & Quotations for the Surgeon* (2), which included some 500 additional aphorisms, quotations, and rules by surgeons and nonsurgeons

about surgery, surgeons, and anything potentially relevant to surgery (*Figure 1*).

The present piece reproduces 294 of the 2100 or so aphorisms and quotations from these two books. These “few” quotations reproduced herein provide only a small taste of Dr. Schein’s splendid collection. I am indebted to Moshe and to TFM Publishing, LTD, for granting permission. When no attribution is given for a quote, the source was unclear.

Moshe Schein (*Figure 2*) was born in Lodz, Poland, in April 1950 but was raised, educated, and fought (in wars) in Israel. He studied medicine in Italy and Israel, married a Swiss lady, and became a Swiss and Israeli citizen. He later trained in surgery in South Africa and England and practiced as a surgeon in South Africa and Israel before immigrating to the USA and practicing in Milwaukee and New York City. In 2004, he left urbane academia (as professor of surgery at Cornell University Medical College) to become a rural surgeon in Keokuk, Iowa, on the Mississippi River. He has been a lifelong collector of aphorisms and quotations about surgery and surgeons. He has published nearly 370 articles in medical journals.

As medicine has advanced, the role of surgery has decreased. The day will certainly come when surgery will be done only to correct the effects of trauma and congenital abnormalities.

R. H. Meade

Extreme remedies are very appropriate for extreme diseases.

Hippocrates (460–377 BC)

The most important result of any surgical operation is a live patient.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

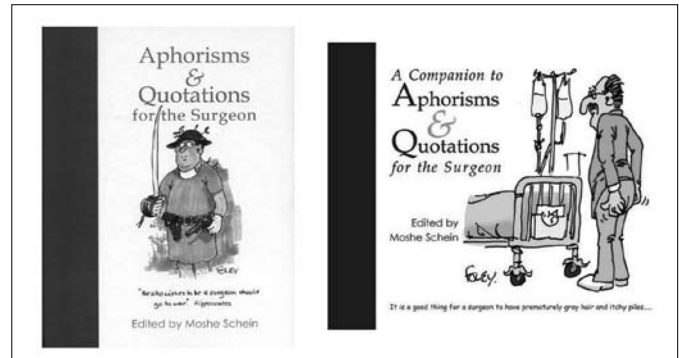


Figure 1. Books of aphorisms on surgery edited by Dr. Moshe Schein.

For the difficult surgery of today, a sturdy pair of legs is also an indispensable necessity!

Owen H. Wangensteen
(1898–1981)

Surgery, like war, is hard . . . but it is better than war. It saves lives and binds men and women of good will together in deepest friendship.

J. Engelbert Dunphy (1908–1981)

When there is multiplicity of operations for one condition, it proves that either none is effective, or all are effective.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

An operation is an assault on a fellow human being—legalised, but nonetheless an assault. In a sense, today the license to kill is given by society only to surgeons.

Alexander J. Walt (1923–1996)

He who works with his hands is a labourer. He who works with his head and his hands is a craftsman.

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226)

Anyone who would attempt to operate on the heart should lose the respect of his colleagues.

Theodor Billroth (1829–1894)

It has been said that there are only two periods in the history of surgery—before Lister and after Lister.

Harvey Graham (1939–)

The incision must be as long as necessary and as short as possible.

Theodor Kocher (1841–1917)



Figure 2. Dr. Moshe Schein.

It is better if the patient goes to the plastic surgeon after an operation, with a large scar, than to the pathologist with a small one.

Denis M. Arkhipov

The feasibility of an operation is not the best indication for its performance.

Henry Cohen (1900–1977)

The basic guideline is “would you have this done to yourself, your wife, your child, your parent?”

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

The lesser the indication, the greater the complication.

Drain pus through the shortest route.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

To isolate patients is to invite neglect.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

It usually requires a considerable time to determine with certainty the virtues of a new method of treatment and usually still longer to ascertain the harmful effects.

Alfred Blalock (1899–1964)

In general, if a technique has been adequately reported in a major journal, but was then not persistently followed up by its creators with a succession of papers confirming the original success, and was not picked up by others, the conclusion may safely be drawn that the procedure was defective or unattractive, and had probably been tried by others, who found it wanting, perhaps without bothering even to publish. There are exceptions to this.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

New ideas seldom have the simplicity of a switched on light bulb.

Thomas Starzl (1926–)

A fool with a tool is still a fool.

My work essentially has been that of plumber of the alimentary canal. I have worked on both ends, but largely in between.

Owen H. Wangenstein (1898–1981)

Never let the sun set or the dawn rise over a complete intestinal obstruction.

Judgement is a great asset; it makes the diagnostician and surgeon both supermen.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

I firmly believe that the best possible operation is not the same thing as the best operation possible.

Rodney Smith (1914–1998)

A surgeon maintains a mental catalogue of the things he did wrong at various times in his career and tries never to repeat them.

Francis D. Moore (1913–2001)

Are you sure that you are the best person for the job?

Francis D. Moore (1913–2001)

Do more for the high risk and less for the low risk.

Ron Lee Nichols

Let someone else kill the patient—do not be a hero.

The operation should be tailored to the patient not vice versa.

It is more difficult to decide when not to operate than when to operate and what operation to perform.

It is preferable to use superior judgment to avoid having to use superior skills.

The knife is dangerous in the hand of the wise, let alone the hand of the fool.

Hebrew proverb

Risk management begins just when you first meet the patient and family.

Acknowledge each member of the family—look into his or her eye; one of them may be the one to initiate the lawsuit against you.

The only thing jurors hate more than cocky surgeons are cocky lawyers.

Sins of omission are harder to prove than sins of commission. He who wishes to be a surgeon should go to war.

Hippocrates (460–377 BC)

Physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor and social problems should largely be solved by them.

Rudolph Virchow (1821–1902)

A fashionable surgeon, like a pelican, can be recognized by the size of his bill.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

The time during which a surgeon can charge large fees is brief.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

As a rule, at the best, a surgeon has 25 years in which to make and lay by enough to provide for his old age and for the decent support of his family after his death.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

A patient who says he must borrow money to pay you will borrow the money, but won't pay you.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

A man who pays his surgeon many gleaming compliments seldom pays him anything.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

Very few people are able to pay large fees. Very few of those who are able to do so are willing.

J. Chalmers Da Costa (1863–1933)

It is the surgeon who benefits most from elective surgery.

When the patient is ill, surgeon is God; when he is cured, doctor is Man; when he gets the bill, doctor is the Devil.

You can be a very rich surgeon or a very good surgeon but rarely both.

Long ago I learned from my father to put old people to bed only for as short a time as was absolutely necessary, for they were like a foundered horse; if they got down it was difficult for them to get up, and their strength ebbed away very rapidly while in bed.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

Young men kill their patients; old men let them die.

James Gregory (1753–1821)

Longevity is worthwhile only if it prolongs youth rather than old age.

Alexis Carrel (1873–1944)

It is very difficult to slow down. The practice of medicine is like heart muscle contraction—it's all or none.

Béla Schick (1877–1967)

Hardening of the attitude occurs before hardening of the arteries.

Matt Oliver

Beware of the young doctor and old barber.

There are bold surgeons and old surgeons but few old-bold surgeons.

Surgeons get long lives and short memories.

Young surgeons err in believing that knowledge can compensate for lack of experience; old surgeons err in believing that experience can compensate for lack of knowledge.

Midnight calls are not made for the sake of hearing the surgeon's voice.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

The progress of disease is not suspended between 5 PM and morning rounds.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Never walk through the ER unless you are called.

Everything gets worse at night. *Moshe Schein (1950–)*

The most important person in the operating room is the patient.

Russell John Howard (1875–1942)

Never leave the operating room without thanking each member of the team; then go and talk to the family.

Carry out the two fundamental surgical requirements: see what you are doing and leave a dry field.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

Actual operative skill cannot be gained by observation, any more than skill in playing the violin can be had by hearing and seeing a virtuoso performing on that instrument.

Allen O. Whipple (1881–1963)

The simpler the procedure, the better the results.

Charles F. M. Saint (1886–1973)

Appose it—don't necrose it.

Karen Tobias

I believe in the 3 principles of surgery: hemostasis, asepsis, and elimination of dead space.

Philip Caropreso

If it looks good, it might work. If it does not look good, it will never work.

William Silen

It is not a dangerous operation: we have never lost a surgeon doing it.

It is better to be lucky than good, and the better you are, the luckier you become.

There are only two things in surgery: cut and sew.

With a knife, pair of scissors, a few clamps, a few fingers, and a suture, you can do anything.

The index finger is still the best instrument.

To any operative video you watch add a pint of blood and sweat; then you'll get the reality.

Not all that is technically feasible is in the patient's best interest.

Orthopedic surgeon: if you can't pin it or cast it, then screw it. Morphine is the best pain reliever.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

The one who operates for pain gets pain.

Moshe Schein (1950–)

God put the pancreas in the back because he did not want surgeons messing with it.

The patient is always more anxious to talk than to listen.

Theodor Billroth (1829–1894)

The patient longs for the doctor's daily visit; it is the event upon which all his thought and emotions turn.

Theodor Billroth (1829–1894)

Never believe what a patient tells you his doctor has said.

Sir William Jenner (1815–1898)

The treatment of a disease may be entirely impersonal; the care of a patient must be completely personal.

Francis W. Peabody (1881–1927)

For us an operation is an incident in the day's work, but for our patients it may be, and no doubt it often is, the sternest and most dreaded of all trials, for the mysteries of life and death surround it, and it must be faced alone.

Berkeley Moynihan (1865–1936)

It must be remembered that physicians of today are trained to treat the sick, and they must learn how to examine so-called well persons to prevent them from getting sick.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

No patient is too sick to have his life saved.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Patients cannot tell their symptoms to the surgeon who will not talk to them.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Great intelligence, and high position in a patient, bear no relation to his understanding of medical problems.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Fit the operation to your patient, not your patient to the operation.

J. M. T. Finney (1863–1942)

We are rapidly becoming a nation of scars.

Lucy Waite

You are the patient's advocate. You work for no one else.

Clifton K. Meador

It's not the surgeon who takes the chance; it's the patient.

Gail Waldbly

Encourage difficult patients or families to seek a second opinion.

The patient who has bad vibes before the operation is usually right.

When it comes to operation, you advise and the patient decides.

Do not perform elective surgery on patients you dislike—refer them.

What the family will decide depends entirely on what and how you'll tell them.

Moshe Schein (1950–)

You are a nobody in surgery unless you have at least as many enemies as friends.

Karl Schein (1911–1974)

The feeling that the chairman isn't doing a satisfactory job in any of his several tasks is often shared by his dean, hospital doctors, patients, students, house staff, faculty, research fellows, spouses and children.

Eugene Braunwald

If you want to be seen you must stand up. If you want to be respected you must sit down.

The sooner the patient can be removed from the depressing influence of general hospital life the more rapid their convalescence.

Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)

A good heart and kidneys can survive all but the most willfully incompetent fluid regimen.

Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Postoperatively, no news is good news.

It is incumbent on those of us in the public sector to ensure that services for the poor do not become poor services.

Thomas Matthews Haizlip Sr.

Surgical conventions are the place where surgeons swap lies about how great their practices are.

When the hospital's janitors come to you with their hernias your practice is well established.

Your job is to satisfy the patient—not the referring MD.

The quality of care is in reverse proportion to the volume of paperwork forced by the system on its surgeons.

Moshe Schein (1950–)

Never be the first but never be the last to accept change.

Angus B. McLachlin (1908–1987)

The quality of survival is as much the surgeon's responsibility as the fact of survival. *Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)*

It is difficult to make the asymptomatic patient feel better. *Stanley O. Hoerr (1909–1990)*

A palliative operation should palliate the patient, not the surgeon.

Try to leave home in a good mood before major surgery.

Do not take your surgical problems home or bring your home to surgery.

A non-nagging wife is an invaluable asset to any surgical career. *Moshe Schein (1950–)*

How much better it is to have the walls covered with books with which we are establishing friendly relations, than with pictures of passing interest which we have happened to obtain. Eventually pictures may lose their interest, whereas books never lose their fascination. *William J. Mayo (1861–1939)*

Textbooks of a previous generation were as large as the textbooks of today, but contained a different body of misinformation. *Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)*

If you would read more you would invent and discover less. *Karl Sternberg*

The last man to see the necessity for re-operation is the man who performed the operation. *Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)*

A negative re-laparotomy is better than a positive autopsy but is not, nevertheless, a benign procedure. *Robert Saadia*

It's better to save a patient in 2 operations than killing him in one. *Hernan Diaz*

This guy is too sick not to be reoperated upon.

It is painful to re-operate on your own complications; it is fun to do on complications of another surgeon. *Moshe Schein (1950–)*

The reputation of a surgeon, in the final analysis, must rest upon: originality; teaching by word of mouth; teaching by the printed word; and operative skill. *William J. Mayo (1861–1939)*

A true surgeon is never fearless. He fears for his patients, he fears for his shortcomings, his own mistakes, but he never fears for himself or his professional reputation. *Samuel J. Mixer (1880–1958)*

He who cannot quote his therapeutic experiences in numbers is a charlatan; be truthful for clarity's sake, do not hesitate to admit failures, as they must show the mode and places of improvement. *Theodor Billroth (1829–1894)*

Scientific truth, which I formerly thought of as fixed, as though it could be weighted and measured, is changeable. Add a fact, change the outlook, and you have a new truth. *William J. Mayo (1861–1939)*

The first attribute of a surgeon is an insatiable curiosity. *Russell John Howard (1875–1942)*

An active clinical surgical position with its responsibilities for human life does not permit serious investigative work to be conducted at the same time. *Elliot Carr Cutler (1888–1947)*

It is too bad that we cannot cut the patient in half in order to compare two regimens of treatment. *Béla Schick (1877–1967)*

One cannot be brief about a subject unless one knows it well. *Mary Evans*

Definition of a double blind trial: two orthopaedic surgeons trying to read an electrocardiogram. *Nick J. Taffinder*

Nothing spoils good results as much as follow-up. *B. Ramana*

If we don't describe it first, our first reaction is always negative.

The plural of *anecdote* is not *data*.

A major difference between responsibility of pilot and surgeon is that the former shares directly in the consequences of his error or neglect, while the latter does not. *John S. Lockwood (1907–1950)*

The more the ECG resembles the EEG, the sicker the heart. *Stephen J. Prevoznik*

It is much easier to add drugs than to subtract them. *Stephen J. Prevoznik*

On resuscitation: if you can't keep the patients alive when they are alive you can't keep them alive when they are dead.

The dumbest kidney is smarter than the smartest doctor.

A surgical airway is better than an arrested patient with a nice-looking neck. Halitosis is better than no breath at all.

The most important contribution a specialist can make is to say the patient's disease is not in his domain. *Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)*

Any operation takes longer than the surgeon says it will. *Clifton K. Meador*

Speed is nothing but economy of movements.

If anyone should consider removing half of my good stomach to cure a small ulcer in my duodenum, I would run faster than he. *Charles H. Mayo (1865–1939)*

In the era of *Helicobacter pylori* doing a gastrectomy for peptic ulcer is like doing a lobectomy for pneumonia. *Asher Hirshberg*

A surgeon is judged by three A's: ability, availability and affability. *Paul Rexnikoff (1896–1984)*

I think all of us who have worked years in the profession understand that many very skillful operators are not good surgeons. *William J. Mayo (1861–1939)*

I can practice in an honorary fashion the arts of surgery and medicine. Being temperamentally inclined to precision and a sharp edge, it might be thought that I should choose the surgeon's role. *Winston S. Churchill (1874–1965)*

You can't always be clever, but you can always be kind. *Charles Wilson Moran (1882–1977)*

He is like the surgeon who has grown tired of blood. He is content that others should operate. *John Le Carre (1931–)*

A surgeon is a physician who can't wait to get into the operating room and, once there, can't wait to get out. *Jonathan R. Hiatt*

The egotistical surgeon is like a monkey; the higher he climbs the more you see of his less attractive features.

A very bold surgeon is one who does not realize that it is the patient who takes all the risks.

If you see 2 surgeons laughing, someone is in trouble.

You can take your work seriously but take yourself less so.

A big surgeon; a big cemetery.
Surgery is a contact sport.
The scrub nurse is a second wife of the surgeon.
Viatcheslav (Slava) Ryndine

How varied was our experience of the battlefield and how fertile the blood of warriors in rearing good surgeons.
Thomas Clifford Allbutt (1836–1925)

Surgery is a controlled trauma under anaesthesia.
Dag Sørlie

Even a dead patient's vital signs are stable.
William M. Bowling

A new truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents . . . but rather because they eventually die.
Max Planck (1858–1947)

Next to the promulgation of the truth, the best thing I can conceive that a man can do is the public recantation of an error.
Joseph Lister (1827–1912)

It's just easier to offer false hope than bitter truth.
Mark Pleatman

The ABCs of any M & M conference are: accuse, blame, criticize, defend (yourself), and evade truth.
The surgical cycle in women: appendix removed, right kidney hooked up, gallbladder taken out, gastroenterostomy, clean sweep of uterus and adnexa.
William Osler (1849–1919)

The lowest mortality and fewest complications result from the removal of normal tissue.
Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Man is as old as his arteries.
Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689)

You don't sleep too well the night before a bad AAA—you do not sleep well the night after a distal bypass.
Angus McIver

Abdominal pain and hypotension equals a ruptured AAA, unless proven otherwise.
It is better to see the outside of the artery before you see the inside.
Atherosclerosis is like a cancer of the vessels.
I hope my surgeon is a Republican.
Ronald Reagan (1911–2004)

Skin is the best dressing.
Joseph Lister (1827–1912)

The likelihood of wound infections has been determined by the time the last stitch is inserted in the wound.
Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

The wound is a window into the body.
One of the characteristics that often sets apart a junior member of the staff from his colleagues in a striking fashion is his actual ability to finish and report a piece of work. . . . It is common to find eager young men who have good ideas, who are industrious, who will look things up in books, but it is the exceptional man who seems to have that last little push that allows him to get it down on a piece of paper in order to get it into press.
Elliot Carr Cutler (1888–1947)

The first report of any new operation is rarely unfavorable.
Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

Some patients instead of being too sick to be operated are too sick not to be operated.

It is usually a bad sign if the anesthesiologist is asking you if you are losing a lot of blood during a case especially when you're not.
Michael Hoffman

Humans can survive easily without an appendix, but surgeons can do so only with difficulty.
Rudolph Virchow (1821–1902)

If a patient has right lower quadrant pain and no appendectomy scar, put one there.
Rip Pfeiffer

It is not true that the appendix is worthless—it has put thousands of surgeons in expensive cars.
What you can do for a patient is infinitely more important than what you can do to a patient. The art of surgery is to discover the difference.
Robert J. Flemming (1934–1990)

When residents answer a question with a question they almost certainly do not know the answer.
Mark M. Ravitch (1910–1989)

A poor assistant is better than a talented opponent.
Rick Paul

The emergency room is the best place to evaluate an emergency.
Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

The test for fitness for operation is the ability of the patient to walk to the operating room.
Andy Gage Sr.

You can tell how bad the surgeon is by the stink of the Bovie in his OR.
Douglas Geehan

Leaving the least part of the cancer is equal to leaving the whole.
John Hunter (1728–1793)

We shall never overcome cancer by surgery: it will be something we shall inject.
George Grey Turner (1877–1951)

There are more people living off cancer than are dying from it.
The examining physician often hesitates to make the necessary examination because it involves soiling his fingers.
William J. Mayo (1861–1939)

Sounds that might shock a duchess are music of the spheres to the surgeon.
William Heneage Ogilvie (1887–1971)

The rule of “2”: when you hear a surgeon telling his number of performed cases, divide it by two. When he tells of his complication rate, multiply it by two.
Rick Paul

No matter what you do, the number of complications will be double if a patient or his spouse is either a physician or a nurse.
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.
Let man learn to be honest and do the right thing or do nothing.
James Marion Sims (1813–1883)

A good surgeon is a doctor who can operate and knows when not to operate.
Theodor Kocher (1841–1917)

Any case presented as: “See the patient when you can at your convenience” is a four-plus-flat-out surgical emergency with a mortality rate of 98% and should be seen immediately.
Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

Everything is controversial in surgery, always was, always will be.
What was controversial before, and is not controversial anymore, will become controversial again very soon.
Increasing knowledge fuels new controversies.

Stop lying! You know, and I know, that I am dying. So do at least stop lying about it! *Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)*

Rather let the patient die in peace, than in pieces.

Dr. Frascani

Even an ingrown toenail operation has a 100% mortality—eventually.

Every neurotic patient ultimately dies of organic disease.

You cannot operate on a differential diagnosis.

Claude Organ Jr. (1926–2005)

A living problem is better than dead certainty.

The most important thing to remember about rare diseases is that they are rare.

The young surgeon who learns the basic precepts of asepsis, hemostasis, adequate exposure and gentleness to tissue has mastered his most difficult lessons.

Robert M. Zollinger (1903–1992)

A poor surgeon hurts one person at a time. A poor teacher hurts 130.

Mary J. Wilson

[There is] a tendency always to attribute fatalities . . . to sins of omission, whereas the many evil results of the sins of commission are given much less consideration.

J. L. Yates (1905–)

One can survive anything nowadays except death.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

Anyone who proposes to do good must not expect people to roll stones out of his way, but must accept his lot calmly if they even roll a few more upon it.

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)

In order to have a constant stream of referrals, the surgeon must please the referring physicians. Sometimes this is best accomplished by doing what those physicians approve or want done. When these desires run contrary to the best judgment of the surgeon, conflicts of interest again appear. If the surgeon does what he thinks his colleagues expect, he may not be doing what he believes is in the best interests of his patients.

George Crile Jr. (1907–1992)

Experience can also consist of doing the same wrong thing over and over again.

Dick van Geldere

Experience is what you rely on when you haven't read anything for a while.

Howard Bennett

In the craft of surgery the masterword is simplicity.

Berkeley Moynihan (1865–1936)

High-risk diseases should have low-risk operations.

The profession of medicine and surgery must always rank as the most noble that men can adopt. The spectacle of a doctor in action among soldiers, in equal danger and with equal courage, saving life where all others are taking it, is one which must always seem glorious, whether to God or man.

Winston S. Churchill (1874–1965)

If you do not come up on a Google.com search you are a nobody.

Moshe Schein (1950–)

The Wright brothers' first flight was shorter than a Boeing 747's wing span. We've just begun with heart transplants.

C. Walton Lillehei (1918–1999)

A car mechanic said argumentatively to his client, a cardiac surgeon: "So Doc, look at this work. I also take valves out, grind

'em, put in new parts, and when I finish this baby will purr like a kitten. So how come you get the big bucks, when you and me are doing basically the same work?" The surgeon replied: "Try doing your work with the engine running."

Legend has it that the doctor was Michael DeBakey (1908–2008)

The only thing we ever learn from medical history is that we never learn.

John B. McKinlay

The decision is more important than the incision.

Prophylactic antibiotics will turn a third-class surgeon into a second class but will never turn a second-class surgeon into the first-class one.

Owen H. Wangenstein (1898–1981)

Pus is like the truth—you have to let it out.

Gareth Morris-Stiff

If the life of a scientific fact is 7 years, the life of a favorite treatment is half of that.

George Crile Jr. (1907–1992)

The paradigm shift in surgical truths was from vehemence-based and eminence-based medicine, to evidence-based medicine.

David Dent

Be not the first by whom the new is tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside.

Surgery is what a surgeon practices. An operation is what a surgeon performs. In this context, there is no such word as surgeries. In Great Britain, surgeries are treatment rooms. Neither an operation nor a patient is a case, but that's another commentary.

C. J. Allen

The hardest thing about being a surgeon is knowing when not to do something. Some people don't understand that, but it is the most important thing. The natural tendency is, of course, to do something, to take action. It really comes down to judgment, which most people don't think of as a surgical skill.

Norman M. Kenyon

Intuition is the fastest way to reach a wrong solution.

Dick van Geldere

When common sense interferes with protocol, follow common sense.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

In the overwhelming majority of instances a therapeutic decision was arrived at in direct relation to what happened in the last similar case the doctor was familiar with.

Lucien L. Israel

The supreme surgeon uses his supreme judgment to avoid situations that would test his supreme abilities.

Judgment is not the act of making a snap decision. Judgment is like playing chess. . . . You need to think three or four moves ahead.

It takes only a few years to learn when to enter the abdomen but many years to learn when to stay out.

Patients sue not when the patient gets angry with the doctor, but when the doctor gets angry at the patient.

Thomas J. Krizek

A CT scan a day keeps the lawyers away.

Howard Bennett

It is necessary to begin always with the most dangerously injured, without regard to rank or distinction.

Dominique Jean Larrey (1766–1842)

If the doctor is good—people will feed him; if the doctor is bad—we don't need him.

N. Semashko, Soviet Minister of Health (1930–)

Economic considerations sometimes motivate the physicians to accept that part of the scientific evidence that best supports the method that gives him the most money.

George Crile Jr. (1907–1992)

Don't let cost-containment become care-containment.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

"Doctor, ever' year I get hundreds of applications fough internship heuh, but I have a helluva time keepin' nurses. Yuh will try to get along with 'em, wont ya?"

Alfred Blalock (1899–1964)

The test for fitness for surgery in geriatric patients is to pull a sheet over their faces, and if they pull it down—they are fit!

David Dent

Then there were the on-calls, like tonight. Thirty years ago it was every other night and his body could cope with it easily; now it was only once a week and every fifth weekend, but the constant stone-in-the-shoe feeling of waiting for the phone to ring always left him drained.

Mike Albany

Incompetence does not necessarily come with age—generally, the incompetent physician was that way from the start of his career. What comes with age is stiff fingers, perhaps a tremor, less visual acuity and diminished endurance, losing technical skills as a result.

Andy Gage

Be kind to people on the way up so they will be kind to you when you are on the way down.

The operating room is the surgeon's laboratory.

William Stewart Halsted (1852–1922)

Is there any way you can be of help in this operation, besides leaving the room?

Michael E. DeBakey (1908–2008)

Leave your attitude outside the operating theatre.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

In the operating room we can save more lives, cure more cancers, restore more function, and relieve more suffering than anywhere else in the hospital.

R. Scott Jones

Many lives have been saved by a moment of reflection at the scrub sink.

Neal R. Reisman

If an operation is difficult, you are not doing it properly.

Robert E. Gross (1905–1988)

Michael Hobsley used to say, before starting a parotidectomy, "Take the clock down, nurse, and put a calendar up."

It's not practice that makes perfect. It's perfect practice that makes perfect.

Vince Lombardi (1913–1970)

Tie a suture like you embrace the one you love: firmly but tenderly.

Rick Paul

Big mistakes are made through small holes.

Rick Paul

Six Ps: proper planning and preparation prevents poor performance.

If you don't know what you are cutting, don't cut it!

You recognize a surgeon or an ob-gyn because he has blood on his shoes, a urologist because he has urine on his, and an anesthetist because on his you see spots of spilled coffee.

Bernard Cristalli

[When undergoing surgery:] Console yourself with the reflection that you are giving the doctor pleasure and that he is getting paid for it.

Mark Twain (1835–1910)

With seriously ill patients, one third of the treatment is for the relatives.

Igor Lewis (1895–1982)

For the patients the last doctor is always the smartest doctor.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

Current chiefs of surgery are CEOs not Chief Educational Officers.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

Medicine is like the food chain: internists are herbivores—like cattle they bunch and coexist with each other; surgeons are carnivores—if put together they would eat each other.

Joseph P. Holt III

The operation is over when the patient is eating a cheeseburger and can't remember your name.

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

The law of discharge: any labs done on the day of discharge will be abnormal.

Don't drive a nicer car than your referral base does.

Tom Mahany

Agreeing to do additional cases when already stretched to meet personal obligations should not be judged as laudable over-achieving. Over-scheduling should instead be understood as a lapse of judgment.

James W. Jones

Don't confuse a good result with good practice.

Tom Curry

Any study that reports a certain number of consecutive cases without a complication (death) actually means that the number of cases plus two were performed with two complications (death); the first and last.

Michael Hoffman

Principles of intensive care: air goes in and out; blood goes "round" and "round"; oxygen is good.

Robert Matz

High-volume physicians may perform a procedure better, but the patient may have been less likely to need it in the first place.

Robert H. Brook

The good thing about a standard of care is that there are so many to choose from.

Surgeons in general don't like theoretical or psychological problems. Things are either black or white. If they don't understand something, they try to put it out of their mind.

Charles Bosk

A trained surgeon knows how to do it; an educated surgeon knows why you do it.

Rodney Peyton

Surgeons make the worst patients. Of course, the opposite may also be true.

Karim Brohi

What is every surgeon's dream? To operate as well as he thinks he does. To earn as much money as everyone else thinks he does. To have as many affairs as his wife thinks he does.

A surgeon reaches maturity only when he stops taking himself too seriously. Some never reach this phase.

Drowning is a leading cause of death in surgeons: they think that they can walk on water, and when they sink, they can't keep their mouth shut.

[On romantic relationships between surgeons and nurses:] A good sheepdog does not kill in his own flock.

George Washington Crile (1864–1943)

Recurrent laryngeal nerve damage produces voice changes, but not choking; they graduate in the choir from singing "Ave Maria" to "Old Man River."

David Dent

Doctors will have more lives to answer for in the next world than even we generals. *Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821)*

If you arrive in the ER and don't know what to do, start putting in tubes until somebody arrives who knows.

Rip Pfeiffer

The doctor is a person who still has his adenoids, tonsils, and appendix.

Lawrence J. Peter

The entire gastrointestinal system to vascular surgeons is an incidental finding on the way to the aorta!

Leo A. Gordon (1947–)

McDonald's "breakfast for under a dollar" actually costs much more than that. You have to factor in the cost of coronary bypass surgery.

George Carlin (1937–2008)

One aspirin a day keeps the vascular surgeon away.

One should not put fingers into a wound, but when other methods fail do not hesitate to apply pressure directly on the

bleeding point. It is much better to have a live patient with a dirty wound than a dead patient with a clean wound.

American Red Cross First Aid Textbook, 1933

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William C Roberts". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "W" and "R".

—WILLIAM CLIFFORD ROBERTS, MD

1. Schein M, ed. *Aphorisms & Quotations for the Surgeon*. Shrewsbury, United Kingdom: TFM Publishing, 2004 (276 pp.).
2. Schein M, ed. *A Companion to Aphorisms & Quotations for the Surgeon*. Shrewsbury, United Kingdom: TFM Publishing, 2008 (224 pp.).