

**MOULDING THE SURGICAL MIND**

William Hunter, 18th-century obstetrician and medical educator, once described surgeons as “savages with knives”. Ironically, one of these savages, his brother John, became one of surgery’s icons. In their time, patients were pinned down, screaming and squirming, by burly assistants, and the surgeon’s fame rested on his dexterity, precision and speed. Then, surgeons were feared, surgery was limited in frequency and scope, and plagued by deadly sepsis.

The arrivals of anaesthesia, antisepsis and asepsis changed all that. Now, surgeons are revered, surgery’s scope is virtually unlimited, and waiting list numbers swell.

But what is the image of the modern surgeon?

In their recent review, *Surgeons and cognitive processes*, Australian surgeons John Hall and Jeffrey Hamdorf and educator Carleen Ellis focus on this image. Surgery continues to be a male-dominated fraternity of adherents of resolute action, aggression, technology and defensive detachment in practice. Their expertise is bound up in experience, and entry into their ranks is influenced by sex and an “intolerance of ambiguity, excessive reliance on high technology, a negative orientation towards psychological problems and a Machiavellianism...expressed as ‘the means justifies the end’ or ‘whatever it takes’.”

But Hall and his colleagues believe that something is missing in the moulding of surgical minds — an emphasis on analysis, problem-solving, evaluation, discrimination and judgement. In short, surgeons’ training is short on thinking, reasoning and understanding. The call by Hall and colleagues to move the focus from action to reflection is not new. Eminent US surgeon William J Mayo once observed that “Surgery is more a matter of mental grasp than it is of handicraftsmanship.”

Stressing this mental grasp requires a seismic shift in surgery’s culture.

*Martin B Van Der Weyden*

**LETTERS**

<b>How much cervical cancer is being prevented?</b>	
Heather S Mitchell	298
<b>Ethics and research participation</b>	
Simon C Gandevia	298
<b>A Quality Use of Medicines program for continuity of care in therapeutics from hospital to community</b>	
Joseph J Gelb	299
Karen I Kaye, Andrea Mant, Linda Kehoe, Wendy C Rotem	299
<b>Clinical practice guidelines for depression in young people</b>	
Jon N Jureidini, Anne L Tonkin	300
Raphael T W Chan, Joseph M Rey, Philip L Hazell	300
<b>Measuring outcomes in patients with depression or anxiety: an essential part of clinical practice</b>	
Brian M Boettcher	302
Heidi Andersen-Dalheim	302
<b>What is pathography?</b>	
Johan A Schioldann	303
<b>Is asthma prevention possible with dietary manipulation?</b>	
Jill L Sherriff	303
Craig M Mellis	303
<b>The verdict from ALLHAT</b>	
Mark R Nelson	304

**BOOK REVIEWS**

<b>Measurement of clinical performance. Practical approaches in acute myocardial infarction</b>	
<i>reviewed by Ian A Scott</i>	276
<b>Systematic reviews in health care: a practical guide</b>	
<i>reviewed by Donald Campbell</i>	276

**OBITUARY**

<b>Vernon Richard Keep</b>	
<i>by Matthew J Keep</i>	284

**IN THIS ISSUE . . .** 250

**BOOKS RECEIVED. . .** 289

**IN OTHER JOURNALS . . .** 297

**MJA Reprints • Colour and B/W**

*Make your handouts stand out from the crowd*

**Distribute the latest health information to colleagues, students and the media.**



Contact the  
MJA Editorial  
Administrator

Authorised articles printed in the MJA are available as reprints and carry the official MJA logo. Why not enquire about an MJA Colour Cover to wrap around your article.

Email: [editorial@ampco.com.au](mailto:editorial@ampco.com.au)



Telephone:  
(02) 9562 6666