



**Can We Better the *Better* Health Care Concept?
(Commentary by Kenneth V. Dodgson MD)**

Part 1

This is one of a seven-part series on personal responsibility as a part of churches' response to the health care crisis. Kenneth V. Dodgson MD is a retired general surgeon, who spent 24 years with the Board of International Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA, serving at the Jorhat Christian Medical Centre, Jorhat, Assam, India. Dr. Dodgson is a graduate of Franklin College of Indiana, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, and Temple University School of Medicine. Upon returning from India, he became the Director and Staff Surgeon of the Occupational Medicine Program of the University of Rochester Medical Center. He and his wife, Sally, reside in Rochester, New York.

1. Introductory Comments

Dr. Atul Gawande, author of *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, considers whether performance in medical practice can be improved by "perseverance...practice, and precision." Speaking on behalf of the medical profession he states "We...face daunting expectations. In medicine our task is to cope with illness and to enable every human being to lead a life as long and free of frailty as science will allow."

Medical practitioners—doctors, nurses, technicians, even hospitals—face high expectations brought on by advances in science and technology. It is not knowledge and technology—important as they are—that lie at the root of the problem. Beyond the science and technology of medical care, there are human attributes, some unquantifiable, that separate exceptional practitioners from the average or less competent. If Dr. Gawande had his way, exemplified by illustrations of exceptional care noted in the book, all physicians would be artists!

Dr. Gawande, an Associate Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School, grew up in Athens, Ohio, a town of 25,000 and the seat of Ohio University. In 1987, at age 22, he graduated from Stanford, having majored in philosophy, politics, and economics—interests which he still pursues in addition to his career in medicine. He has been a Rhodes Scholar, a Gary Hart volunteer, a Bill Clinton Health Care Lieutenant, a health care researcher, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, was included in the 2002 Edition of *The Best American Science Writing*, and his previous book, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*, was finalist for a National Book Award.

What is lacking in Dr. Gawande's excellent book is any reference to the fact that people, as well as doctors, need to practice the art of good health which would render doctors less needed. Contemporary American society is experiencing a medical care crisis which is going to continue to grow as we begin to deal with the increasing demands for medical care by the boomer generation. The fact that an estimated 40 to 50 million people have no medical insurance presents a major problem. With businesses and corporations cutting back or discontinuing medical insurance coverage for employees, the problem is magnified. With escalating unemployment resulting from the current economic recession, our health care system is now in crisis.

Congress is aware that the medical care system needs extensive revision. The Obama Administration desires legislation within this year, within the current session of Congress, if possible. Everyone wants the best medical care. Few want to pay for it, particularly if it involves increased taxes. Opponents of the "Obama Plan" are rightly concerned that a financially uncontrolled medical care system has the potential to bankrupt the country.

This series of seven short commentaries deals with what can be done by individuals and small groups if they take personal responsibility for their health. It is already clear from many studies and many successful programs that smoking cessation can make a major impact not only on individual health, but also on the overall financial demand for medical treatment. This series reflects on the potential impact that weight control and exercise can have with respect both to individual health and an economy in crisis.

American Baptists Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ

Office of the General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA • PO Box 851 • Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851
800-ABC-3USA, extension 2274 • Roy.Medley@abc-usa.org
www.abc-usa.org