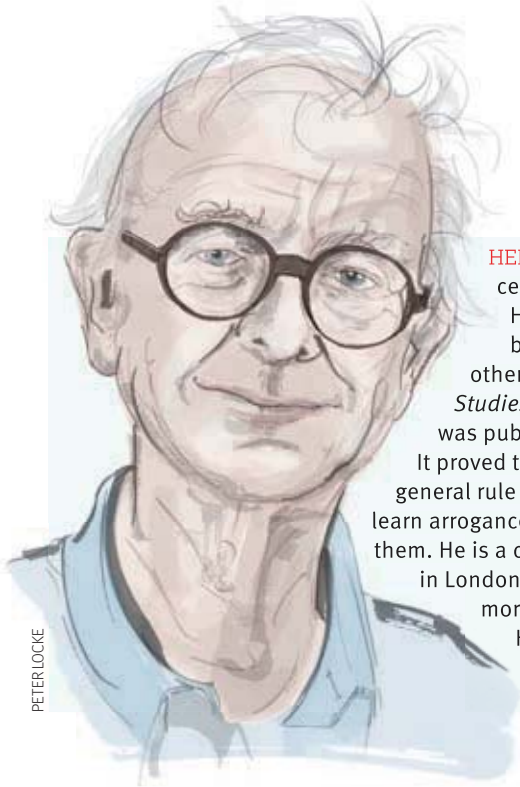


# Henry Marsh

## Thinking fast and slow



**HENRY MARSH** is a neurosurgeon celebrated for a work of literature. His candid reflections on the risky business of poking his nose into other people's heads, *Do No Harm: Studies of Life, Death and Brain Surgery*, was published to huge acclaim in 2014. It proved that there are exceptions to the general rule that surgeons are born arrogant, learn arrogance, or have arrogance thrust upon them. He is a consultant at St George's Hospital in London who remembers his mistakes more vividly than his successes. He has refreshingly little time for bureaucratic interference, however well meant it may be.

**What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?**

"Endovascular treatment of intracranial aneurysms, wonderful for patients but not for neurosurgeons"

**What was your earliest ambition?**

To be a poet. Fortunately, unlike the Vogons in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, I abandoned this early on.

**Who has been your biggest inspiration?**

Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews from the Nazis but was afterwards arrested by the Russians and disappeared in Stalin's Gulag.

**What was the worst mistake in your career?**

There are so many mistakes I don't know where to start—mainly patients I have failed. My favourite surgical quotation is by the French surgeon René Leriche: that all surgeons have an inner cemetery that they have to visit regularly to contemplate their mistakes.

**What was your best career move?**

Becoming a neurosurgical senior house officer at the Royal Free Hospital in London in 1981.

**Bevan or Lansley? Who has been the best and the worst health secretary in your lifetime?**

The best was Nye Bevan for starting the NHS, the worst Kenneth Clarke for introducing the wholly untried idea of the internal market. The NHS has many faults, but I suspect (though cannot prove) that the "competition" of the internal market has not helped in any way other than further to drive up costs.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**

Yes, very strongly. I think bicycles and euthanasia are signs of higher civilisation.

**Who is the person you would most like to thank?**

My parents.

**To whom would you most like to apologise?**

The many patients I have failed.

**If you were given £1m what would you spend it on?**

Half to my three children and half to obscure charities, mainly for the war wounded in Ukraine, where I have been working in my own time for more than 20 years.

**Where are or were you happiest?**

In my family's cottage in rural mid-Wales, bought by my parents many years ago and one of the many reasons for my gratitude.

**What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?**

Endovascular treatment of intracranial aneurysms, wonderful for patients but not for neurosurgeons. Aneurysm surgery defined neurosurgery 20 years ago, being delicate, dangerous, and difficult, but modern interventional radiological techniques are slightly safer and much less traumatic for the patients and in the United Kingdom are performed by radiologists.

**What book should every doctor read?**

Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Doctors make many serious decisions about their patients every day, and we are prone to all the "cognitive biases" that Kahneman so brilliantly describes. We are much less rational than we like to think. Kahneman's critical conclusion is that other people are better at seeing our mistakes than we are ourselves. Although clinical meetings can be trying, they are a very important part of medical practice, and having good colleagues who feel able to criticise you is very important for the safety of your patients.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Gin and tonic.

**If you could be invisible for a day what would you do?**

Prowl around the Department of Health to see whether my many prejudices are justified.

**What television programmes do you like?**

I don't have a television.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

My woodworking tools.

**What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your carbon footprint?**

I have cycled almost every day in London since 1973 and try to keep driving to a minimum. That and cold showers.

**What personal ambition do you still have?**

To write another book before my wits start to fade.

**Summarise your personality in three words**

Impatient, driven, easily frightened.

**Where does alcohol fit into your life?**

More than it probably should, which is why I am trying to wean myself on to green tea in the evenings.

**What is your pet hate?**

Political correctness.

**Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?**

None whatsoever. I have been incredibly spoilt, fortunate, and privileged to have had the career and colleagues that I have had.

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