



# OBSERVATIONS

## BMJ CONFIDENTIAL

### Ara Darzi: Pet hate—procrastinators



#### What was your earliest ambition?

I always tell people that I'm a failed engineer. My father hoped that I'd follow in his footsteps, and I suppose I was drawn to the creativity and precision of surgical technology by that unfulfilled vocation. But medicine and surgery were my earliest goals.

#### Who has been your biggest inspiration?

Avedis Donabedian—a great pioneer of health services research and quality improvement, a professor of public health in Michigan, and a fellow Armenian—was an enormously influential figure throughout my career. He really set the benchmark, in so many ways.

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

I've made so many bad mistakes that I'm not sure of the worst. Once you've made a few, however, you begin to recognise that each brings a unique learning opportunity. There's no value in being paralysed by the fear of making mistakes: it's far better to fail quickly and to learn.

#### What was your best career move?

Making the leap to become a full time academic clinician at Imperial College London gave me the freedom and space to start building a strong team and to really drive an academic programme around surgical technologies, patient safety, and, ultimately, quality improvement.

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

I don't celebrate failure, so I won't comment on the worst. The vision and leadership of Nye Bevan, however, in driving the world's first national model of universal health coverage in the United Kingdom, was an unparalleled feat in the country's history. That certainly warrants celebration.

#### Who is the person you would most like to thank, and why?

My parents, my wife, and my kids. For everything.

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

My children, for not picking them up from school enough.

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

I'd open a restaurant somewhere hot and near the sea.

#### Where are or were you happiest?

In a nice restaurant with friends and family.

**Biography**

Ara Darzi, 55, has been more sure footed than any of the other GOATs appointed in Gordon Brown's "Government of all the talents" in 2007. He proved to be an effective, hardworking minister and remains indispensable, while his fellow GOATs are long out to pasture. Born in Baghdad to expatriate Armenian parents, Darzi trained in Dublin and moved to the UK as a surgeon in 1990. An academic clinician who pioneered laparoscopic surgery, he went on to make his mark in policy with ambitious healthcare proposals in London as parliamentary undersecretary of state—which, where implemented, have been a success—and he installed quality as the lodestone of the NHS in his 2008 report, *High Quality Care for All*. He is the Paul Hamlyn chair of surgery at Imperial College London and director of the Institute of Global Health Innovation, and he was awarded the Order of Merit in the 2016 New Year Honours.

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

Information technology.

**Do you support doctor assisted suicide?**

There's an intrinsic conflict in the medical profession's duty of care if doctors are accountable for decision making or planning in assisted suicide. That said, I strongly support patient choice in all areas of care, so this important public debate must continue.

**What book should every doctor read?**

Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*.

**What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?**

"Stairway to Heaven," by Led Zeppelin.

**What is your guiltiest pleasure?**

Chinese dumplings for lunch on a Friday, after I've finished my operating list.

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

I'd probably take the day off and find a boat somewhere on a calm river.

**What television programmes do you like?**

*Mrs Brown's Boys*.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

My BlackBerry.

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

Taking the tube and walking when I can. I believe that we called it "active travel" when I was leading the London Health

Commission for Boris Johnson (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_PaFn-bFgxs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PaFn-bFgxs)).

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

We still have a long way to go to reduce inequities in the quality of healthcare provision, both domestically and internationally. My ambition remains the same: to improve healthcare outcomes for patients and the public, across all settings of care.

**Summarise your personality in three words**

Creative, clear sighted, and bold.

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

I enjoy good wines, but I find myself collecting many more bottles than I can consume!

**What is your pet hate?**

Procrastinators and bureaucracy.

**What would be on the menu for your last supper?**

A steak and a glass of red wine.

**Do you have any regrets about becoming an academic doctor or parliamentarian?**

I had no grand plan at the beginning of my career, but I've been very fortunate to wear several hats over the years. Contributing to science and medicine in the UK, as well as abroad, has been a privilege. I have no regrets.

**If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?**

As I said before, I'd probably have ended up as an engineer or architect of some sort. I imagine I might be designing bridges or making tall buildings somewhere—maybe even the odd hospital.