

A Review of

Every Second Counts

The Race to Transplant the First Human Heart

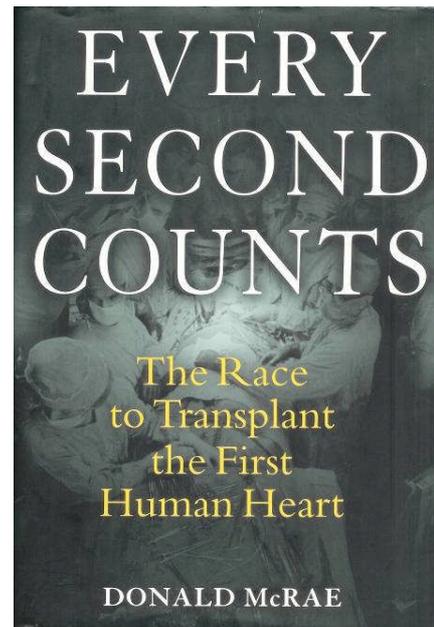
Author: Donald McRae

Reviewed by Jim Gleason, heart recipient

Written in the styles of historic biography and gripping suspense driven novels, award winning author and fellow African countryman, Donald McRae, recounts the real-life “race to the death” between four amazing cardiac surgeons’ to become the first to accomplish what was then seen as “impossible” – the “miracle” of transplanting a human heart into another human being. While each were poised and ready to be the first, it was the risk taking Christiaan Barnard, working in Cape Town, South Africa where less restrictive laws allowed him to take the beating heart of a brain dead donor to save a dying Louis Washkansky’s life with the world’s first human heart transplant on December 3rd, 1967. Amidst passionate rivalry, left in the shadow of worldwide news coverage frenzy were Norman Shumway (California), Richard Lower (Virginia) and New York's Adrian Kantrowitz, each long time researchers of organ transplant and rejection who were dependent on the right recipient/donor combination, some only days away from performing the same life saving historical milestone. Barnard, some would say, appropriated their work in his own successful surgery, but in the United States, brain death had yet to be legally recognized, and, as it turns out, Barnard is often credited with helping overturn that disparity of outdated medical fact vs. legal definition of death in that successful operation. Barnard’s life story is both technically remarkable and yet a sad personal one in its final years, while the others, overcoming the initial disappointment in missing out on that milestone themselves, continue to perfect the surgery and later mechanical discoveries that we see today in common use.

McRae’s narrative, describing in graphical medical detail amazing surgeries of research in animal subjects and later on dying patients who had no other options, along with his carefully researched personality descriptions of the main characters, makes for fascinating reading for medical professional and patient alike. This was especially true for this reviewer who, with a 1994 heart transplant, owes his life to these pioneering efforts that too often resulted in death for the early patients who gave their lives in sacrifice of medical progress. Today, with over 2500 heart transplants done each year in the US alone and survival rates of 89% over their first year, heart transplants may seem almost routine. For each heart recipient, however, they certainly are NOT routine, but arguably remain the “outstanding medical achievement of the 20th Century.”

A word of advice, don’t miss reading the personal and detailed closing 38 pages of Notes and Sources in which the author recounts his personal interviews and researching for each chapter.



Every Second Counts is available from Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com

Brief bio:

Jim Gleason, receiving his own heart transplant Oct. '94, retired after 37 years with Unisys Corporation in 2005, is a volunteer with the Gift of Life Donor Program in Philadelphia, NKF and UNOS as well as a nationally recognized speaker and author. His own book, **A Gift from the Heart**, is offered in CD format free in thanks to his donor family and can be obtained by contacting him at GLEASONJIM@AOL.COM.

(total: 452 words in length)