A Career in Surgery

With Dr Titus Kwok, Surgical Superintendent at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Dr David Coker, Surgical SRMO at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital

Introduction
A career in surgery can be both exceptionally rewarding and challenging. Dr Titus Kwok talks to us about his experience as a surgeon, the rewards and difficulties in surgical training, and tips for those who are considering a career in surgery.

1. **Why choose surgery as a career? How can you tell if surgery is right for you?**
   - Depends on the individual - there’s always a specialty that will suit you in medicine
   - Test out a few different things to find what suits you
   - Get exposure:
     - Speak to surgical registrars in your field of interest
     - Go to theatres whenever you can
     - Consider staying back late for more exposure if needed

2. **What are the challenges in surgical training?**
   - Surgical training is about transforming someone into a safe and proficient surgeon to provide the highest standard of care
   - Challenges on a hospital level:
     - Resource distribution
     - Allocation of trainees to provide adequate numbers of trainees and experience for trainees
   - Challenges on a training level:
     - Prepare trainees to have skill sets that are up to date and in line with current practice
     - May need 10,000 hours to master a skill, and potentially more than that due to expanding curriculum
   - Challenges on completion of training:
     - Metropolitan areas are saturated in terms of consultant positions
     - Increasing emphasis on centralization of sub-specialty services with evidence it may improve patient outcomes. This may mean surgeons need further training at a tertiary centre to provide subspecialty services

3. **How can you try to overcome the challenges?**
   - Some challenges may not be able to be overcome - in which case, go with the flow
   - For those challenges that can be overcome:
     - Become a better organiser and planner. Gather more information about what lies ahead, to help plan your activities. For example, look up the cases on the theatre lists ahead, read up and learn prior to the case - this may improve learning efficiency
     - Maintain level of training for competency
     - Maintain good collegial relationship with fellow trainees – it will help you down the road

4. **What are the best aspects of a career in surgery?**
   - The journey with your patient is the most rewarding
   - Being involved in the care of your patients
• Feeling humbled by the amount of trust and confidence they put in you
• Synthesise information and apply knowledge
• Operating – satisfying outcomes and fascinating anatomy
• Delivering good news once operation is done

5. What are the qualities that make a good surgeon?
• The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has 9 criteria for what makes a competent surgeon
  o Collaboration and teamwork
  o Communication
  o Health advocacy
  o Judgement – clinical decision making
  o Management and leadership
  o Medical expertise
  o Professionalism and ethics
  o Technical expertise
• Personal qualities
  o Being a good stress handler
  o Being someone who falls in and out of sleep quickly
  o Develop a personal interest. It’s not just about work - have a hobby or interest to help destress

6. What advice during your training has stuck with you?
• Advice received during surgical training by a senior surgeon – “You are about to embark on a highly trained and disciplined profession that matters the life and death of a patient. Always be ready and be careful about each decision you make.” This advice helps me to put the patient first in any circumstance

7. Advice for aspiring surgeons
• Listen to yourself carefully about what you want to do
  o Only those who are most passionate and committed to surgery will stay and do well
  o Surgery is a lifelong apprenticeship that evolves with you as you get older
  o Maintain passion and stay motivated
• Need to adopt surgeon’s lifestyle
  o Need to be ready and standing by for your patient, may mean missing weekends
• Familiarise yourself with the process of application e.g. visit the RACS website, talk to registrars, go to career nights
• Pick a specialty you are really interested in and spend a good amount of time in it to test it out
• Choose a specialty carefully - Keep in mind that it takes time to change career direction e.g. switching from plastics to colorectal surgery
• Building CVs
  o Shape your CV to the nine competencies on the college website – have something to say and some marks in all areas to be well rounded
  o Your CV should be like a storybook - people should know you are committed from the beginning, and have made progressive steps towards your goal
  o Ask around and keep an eye out for training courses, expos
  o Research - start out with some short quick projects, then use that topic as your roots to stem out to a medium term project
  o Referees are important – should happen if you have a good personality and work ethic

Reference
Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. Becoming a competent and proficient surgeon: training standards for the nine RACS competencies. 2012

Summarised by Dr Linda Wu, RMO, Royal North Shore Hospital. July 2016