

## Surgical Research Elective in the United States: An Australian Medical Student's Experience

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The value of surgical research is increasingly recognised by undergraduate medical students interested in pursuing a surgical career. This article describes how an undergraduate medical student from Monash University built upon his surgical research experience from the Eastern Health Surgical Research Group in Australia, by undertaking a 9-week research elective at the Johns Hopkins Center of Surgery Trials and Outcomes Research. Practical issues encountered, such as visa and housing, are outlined. Differing attitudes and trends in surgical research among Australian and American medical students, means of assessing surgical research productivity and the benefits of surgical research are discussed. Surgical research should be encouraged and supported in young trainee surgeons; a short-term surgical research elective can be productive provided the student is focused and realistic about expectations.

**Background:** The purpose of this survey was to determine the views of final year medical students in Melbourne regarding both undergraduate surgical teaching and the students' career aspirations.

**Methods:** A structured questionnaire was given to all final year medical students at Monash and Melbourne Universities in 2003. The questions dealt with the factors influencing graduating medical students, including theatre experience, encouragement/support from surgeons, presence of mentors, lifestyle factors and gender issues.

**Results:** The response rate was 61.2% (251/410). Of these, 50.6% were male, 32.3% declared an interest in surgical training with the remainder either uncertain (24%) or uninterested (44%). Male students were more likely to be interested in surgery. General surgery was the most popular field (69%), followed by plastic surgery (37%) and orthopaedic surgery (35%). Of respondents, 78% reported positive influences towards pursuing a surgical career during their undergraduate years, while 63% reported a negative experience. A total of 67% believed that the current curriculum is adequate and 43% that there is enough support/encouragement towards a surgical career. Only 44% of respondents reported that surgeons are approachable. Lifestyle and family factors were the most important career influence. In particular, 57% of female respondents felt discouraged from pursuing a surgical career and 99% of these women reported lifestyle/family factors as the main source of discouragement, with a further 72% identifying a lack of female role models.

**Conclusions:** This survey highlights important issues in current undergraduate perception of surgical teaching and higher training. Issues that may encourage or discourage a graduating student to pursue a surgical career are identified.

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