



Interest in international surgical volunteerism: results of a survey of members of the American Pediatric Surgical Association

Marilyn W. Butler ^{a,*}, Sanjay Krishnaswami ^b, David H. Rothstein ^c, Robert A. Cusick ^d

^a*Division of Pediatric Surgery, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA*

^b*Oregon Health and Sciences University, Portland, OR, USA*

^c*Children's Memorial Hospital, Chicago, IL, USA*

^d*University of Nebraska, Omaha, NB, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose: This study assesses interest in international volunteer work by members of the American Pediatric Surgical Association (APSA) and attempts to identify demographics, motivations, obstacles, and institutional issues of the respondents.

Methods: An online survey service was used to send a 25-question survey to all APSA members with email addresses in November 2009. An answer to all questions was not required. Written comments were encouraged.

Results: The survey was sent to 807 members of whom 316 responded, for a response rate of 39%. International work had been done previously by 48% of respondents, whereas 95% stated that they were interested or perhaps interested in doing so. Most (83%) were interested in operating with local surgeons to teach them how to perform procedures. Altruism was the chief motivation in 75% of respondents. Primary obstacles to doing international work were family obligations and lack of time, although 37% stated that a lack of information about volunteer opportunities was an issue. A significant number of respondents (48%) stated that their institution had no established international collaborations.

Conclusion: This study suggests that there is interest in international volunteerism among many members of APSA. Understanding the issues surrounding surgical volunteerism may facilitate humanitarian involvement among pediatric surgeons.

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Recent years have seen a burgeoning interest in addressing unmet surgical needs in the global arena. Along with efforts to identify the scope of surgical disease worldwide,

particularly in resource-poor areas, much interest has focused on how to blend volunteer interest with sustainability and education of local surgeons.

With the support of the International Relations Committee of the American Pediatric Surgical Association (APSA), a survey was conducted of APSA members to assess the extent of member involvement and interest in international volunteer work as well as to characterize personal attitudes

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 650 723 6439; fax: +1 650 725 5577.

E-mail address: mwbutler@gmail.com (M.W. Butler).

about international volunteerism, motivations and obstacles to such work, institutional disposition toward member involvement, and the role of trainees.

1. Methods

The survey was conducted under the auspices of the International Relations Committee of APSA. The Board of Governors of APSA approved the survey for distribution to its members, the survey was voluntary, and it did not involve human subjects or patients.

The Web-based tool SurveyMonkey was used to distribute the survey. An email inviting members to participate in the survey was sent to 807 members from APSA headquarters on November 2, 2009. Email reminders were sent 14 and 21 days after the initial invitation, and the survey was closed on November 24, 2009. One hundred fifty APSA members did not receive the survey because they either had no email address or an invalid email address was on file.

The survey consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions, and additional written comments were encouraged. Questions and responses were grouped into 4 categories for discussion: personal and professional demographics, international experience and interests, motivations and obstacles for international work, and institutional disposition toward international work.

2. Results

Of the 807 members who received the survey, 316 replied for a response rate of 39.2%. Although an answer to all questions was not required, the mean number of responses to each of the 25 questions was 309 (range, 303-314; standard error of the mean \pm 0.66), indicating that most people answered the survey in its entirety. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number.

2.1. Professional and personal demographics

Demographics for survey respondents are shown in Table 1. Most respondents were full-time pediatric surgeons currently in practice (85%, $n = 264$), and most were at an academic institution (62%, $n = 192$). As far as professional experience, 71% ($n = 220$) had been in practice for 10 or more years. Roughly one-third of attending surgeons were in a group of 2 to 4 surgeons, whereas another third were in a practice of 5 to 7 surgeons. Most surgeons took 3 to 4 weeks of vacation annually (64%, $n = 190$).

With regard to personal life-style characteristics, the overwhelming majority of respondents reported themselves to be married or in a committed relationship (93%, $n = 285$). In addition, 90% ($n = 278$) replied that they have children, more than 60% of whom were younger than 18 years.

Table 1 Demographics

	% ^a
Work status ($n = 309$)	
Full time	85
Part time	6
Retired	9
Practice type ($n = 312$)	
Academic institution	62
Hospital employee	14
Private practice (group)	13
Private practice (solo)	4
Military	1
Other	6
Years practicing pediatric surgery ($n = 308$)	
Currently a pediatric surgery fellow	<1
1-5	13
5-10	15
10-20	36
>20	35
No. of surgeons in group ($n = 303$)	
1	10
2-4	36
5-7	32
≥ 8	22
Weeks of vacation per year ($n = 298$)	
None	2
1	1
2	12
3	26
4	38
5	4
6	11
>6	6
Marital status ($n = 308$)	
Single	8
Married or in committed relationship	93
Children ($n = 309$)	
None	10
<18 y	56
>18 y	34

^a Sum of percentages may be other than 100 because of rounding off.

2.2. International experience and interests

Responses regarding previous international experience are summarized in Table 2. Respondents were nearly evenly split between those who had not done previous international surgical volunteer work (52%, $n = 162$) and those who had (49%, $n = 152$), most of whom had done these activities within the last 5 years. Most who had engaged in international volunteerism did so as an attending surgeon (90%, $n = 139$), whereas 6% ($n = 9$) did so after retirement. Of the attending surgeons who have engaged in volunteer work, 25% ($n = 41$) had taken a trainee from their institution with them when they volunteered. Write-in comments regarding pediatric surgery trainee involvement in international work included several describing the strong interest of

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