



## Original article

# Choosing Surgery as a Specialty: Opinions of Medical Students about Surgery and Surgeons<sup>☆</sup>



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## A B S T R A C T

**Introduction:** Since the number of applicants to residencies in general surgery in Argentina seems to be decreasing, we designed this work with the objective of studying the factors considered undesirable by students when choosing surgery as a specialty.

**Material and methods:** Between March and April 2012, one-hundred students were surveyed with a structured questionnaire with true/false binary answers in an observational case-control design. The survey contained 26 statements that made reference to characteristics of surgery as a specialty, or about the personality and lifestyle of surgeons, as they could be perceived by students. As a control group the same survey was applied to 20 surgeons who were in contact with the students and that could represent a role model for them during their rotation in surgery.

**Results:** Comparison between students and surgeons showed no difference in most answers, except in “surgery has poor reimbursement” (OR: 8.9;  $P=0.001$ ), “there is not enough job demand” (OR: 8.1;  $P=0.015$ ), “surgery restrains intellectual development” (OR: 17.5;  $P=0.014$ ), “surgeons have too many non-scheduled activities” (OR: 9.36;  $P=0.024$ ), “they have a limited patient-physician relationship” (OR: 3.61;  $P=0.009$ ), “they have little time for family” (OR: 4.27;  $P=0.036$ ) and “they are exposed to infectious diseases” (OR: 5.90;  $P=0.007$ ).  
**Conclusions:** Women would be as interested as men in working as surgeons; a remarkable fact when considering that the surgical specialties have been predominantly filled by men. The fact that surgeons mostly coincide with the views of students means that role models should be reviewed to promote vocations.

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## Elegir a la cirugía como especialidad: Opiniones de los estudiantes de la Universidad de Buenos Aires sobre la cirugía y los cirujanos

### RESUMEN

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**Introducción:** Dado que el número de aspirantes a las residencias en cirugía en Argentina parece estar disminuyendo, se realizó este trabajo con el objetivo de estudiar cuáles eran los factores que los estudiantes consideraban indeseables a la hora de elegir la cirugía como especialidad.

**Material y métodos:** Entre marzo y abril de 2012 se encuestó a 100 alumnos de la materia cirugía mediante un diseño observacional de caso-control. La encuesta contenía 26 afirmaciones referidas a algunas características de la cirugía como especialidad, o a la personalidad y estilo de vida de los cirujanos, según podían ser percibidas por los estudiantes. La misma encuesta se aplicó a 20 cirujanos que estaban en contacto con los alumnos y que podían representar un modelo para ellos durante su rotación en la materia.

**Resultados:** Al comparar alumnos y cirujanos no hubo diferencias en la mayoría de las respuestas, excepto en «la cirugía no está bien pagada» (OR: 8,9; p = 0,0001), «no tiene mucha demanda laboral» (OR: 8,1; p = 0,015), «limita el crecimiento intelectual» (OR: 17,5; p = 0,014), «los cirujanos tienen muchas actividades no programadas» (OR: 9,36; p = 0,024), «tienen una relación médico-paciente limitada» (OR: 3,61; p = 0,009), «tienen poco tiempo para la familia» (OR: 4,27; p = 0,036) y «tienen riesgo alto de exposición a infecciones» (OR: 5,90; p = 0,007).

**Conclusiones:** Las mujeres estarían tan interesadas como los varones en ejercer la cirugía; hecho destacable si se considera que las especialidades quirúrgicas han sido predominantemente masculinas. El hecho de que los cirujanos coincidieran mayormente con las opiniones de los estudiantes exigiría la revisión del rol de aquellos como modelos para promover las vocaciones.

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## Introduction

The choice of a specialty is a decision required of recent graduates who opt for a career in medicine. In addition to the subjective value of vocation, there are other factors that seem to influence students' choices, including job opportunities, the prestige of the specialty among colleagues and patients, duration of the training period, anticipated salary, and expected lifestyle and quality of life.<sup>1-4</sup>

In Argentina, the number of aspiring graduates for admission to general surgery residencies does not seem to have increased proportionally with the number of graduates. At the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the number of applicants to surgical programs only grew 13% from 2009 to 2012; meanwhile, the applicants to pediatrics, for example, rose 32%.<sup>5</sup> This trend was also a cause for concern in the U.S., where an increase was reported in the number of unfilled positions in the *National Resident Matching Program*.<sup>6</sup> Almost one decade earlier, the same problem of a dwindling interest in surgical specialties was identified in Spain<sup>7</sup>; consequently, plans were proposed to reduce the workload of residents in the emergency department<sup>8</sup> and to implement new teaching technologies in the undergraduate program in order to make surgery more attractive.<sup>9</sup> Reports from postgraduates who choose surgery as a specialty suggest that these decisions were already made at the beginning of their university studies. This study observed that, when students in their fifth year were surveyed, 15% still had not decided which specialty to pursue. It was expected that, by the end of their degree, this percentage of "undecided students" would be proportionally

distributed among the different specialties. But, when the students were again surveyed 2 months before finishing their studies, this percentage of undecided students was ultimately divided amongst the other specialties, to the detriment of surgery.<sup>10,11</sup> This would support the concept that the choice for surgery would be made earlier on in the decision-making process of the candidates and, consequently, undergraduate contact with the subject matter might not be determinant in opting for this specialty. Thus, the exposure of students to more attractive rotations during their coursework would not modify the perception that they already had of the material, particularly with regards to lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

Given the challenge for finding ways to promote interest in surgery, the following study was designed in order to study which factors were considered undesirable by students when choosing surgery as a specialty.

## Materials and Methods

Between March and April 2012, 100 surgery students at the Hospital de Clínicas of the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina) were surveyed. The study design was an observational case-control analysis that intended to analyze the relationship between the condition of choosing or not choosing surgery as a specialty; different factors were included in the survey questions. The questionnaire, which had been adapted from Gelfand et al.,<sup>1</sup> was a structured type with dichotomous responses and was made up of a group of statements or declarations that the students responded to with the options of "true" or "false". Out of the 26 statements,

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