

## Surgical Education

# Role models and mentors in surgery

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Mentors;  
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### Abstract

**BACKGROUND:** A number of studies have highlighted the importance of positive role models and mentors in influencing medical students' ultimate career decisions. This article sought to review the relevant literature in relation to mentors and role models in surgery.

**DATA SOURCES:** A comprehensive PubMed search of the literature on the subject of role models and mentors was performed using the following keywords: "Mentors," "Mentorship," and "Role Models" alone and in conjunction with the words "medicine" and "surgery."

**CONCLUSIONS:** This article defines the terms role model and mentor and highlights the differences between these. It identifies the importance of early intervention in medical students' careers by surgeons and the possibility of junior doctors acting as mentors. Formal mentoring programs appear to be associated with greater satisfaction among surgical trainees regarding mentorship. In addition, this review serves to show the potential approaches to developing mentorship and role models in surgery.  
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Over the past few decades, the numbers of junior doctors embarking on a surgical training pathway have declined. In the United States, 10% of surgical residency positions remain vacant and as a result must be filled by foreign graduates.<sup>1</sup> A surgical career appears to be no longer as attractive as it once was. This may be because of the prolonged training, the physical and mental demands, and the lifestyle factors associated with a career in surgery. The introduction of the European Working Time Directive has helped to reduce the working hours in some centers across Europe, but the lack of training time associated with it in addition to a reduction in financial reimbursement may have deterred some people from pursuing a career in surgery. The declining number of students opting for a career in surgery has

generated much concern. Therefore, there is a need to devise strategies to promote student interest in the field of surgery. One such solution lies in the area of mentorship and role models as indicated by their influence on medical students in determining their future career choice.<sup>2,3</sup> This article seeks to examine the role of mentorship and role modeling in modern surgery and to determine whether these may be important in career determination for medical students and young doctors.

## Methods

The PubMed database was used to identify articles pertaining to the topic of role models and mentors in surgery. To conduct the search, the following terms were included: "Role model(s)," "Mentor," "Surgery," "Medicine," and "Mentorship." In addition, the Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT were used to limit the search results. The initial

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search yielded 4,069 articles regarding role models and 532 on the topic of mentorship in surgery and medicine. These were narrowed down systematically to papers in English that pertained to mentorship and role modeling in the context of surgery. Further articles were located from reference lists and abstracts. Thirty-six articles relevant to mentorship and role modeling in surgery were identified. Additional articles were sought from other health care disciplines to aid in the process of defining terminology and to place the surgical articles in a wider context.

## Mentor

The word mentor is derived from the ancient Greek mythological character Mentor, who was asked by Odysseus to raise and teach his son Telemachus while he, Odysseus, pursued his odyssey.<sup>4</sup> A recent definition of mentoring was provided by the Standing Committee on Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education in the United Kingdom, which described mentoring as “a process whereby an experienced, highly regarded, empathetic person (the mentor) guides another (usually younger) individual (the mentee) in the development and re-examination of their own ideas, learning and personal and professional development. The mentor, who often but not necessarily works in the same organisation or field as the mentee, achieves this by listening or talking in confidence to the mentee.”<sup>5</sup> A mentor has numerous roles including that of adviser and consultant, friend, teacher, coach, and leader.<sup>6</sup> Singletary<sup>7</sup> states that a good mentor should support and facilitate, listen, teach by example, encourage and motivate, promote independence and balance, and rejoice in the success of their mentees. Conversely, mentors, by virtue of their actions, can even be detrimental to their mentees. Threatening, taking credit, taking over, imposing influence, and assuming the role of problem solver are mechanisms by which mentors can negatively impact on the personal development of the mentees.

## Role models

Role models are described as “people we can identify with, who have qualities we would like to have and are in positions we would like to reach.”<sup>8</sup> The surgical role model has evolved from a traditional all-dominant, demanding individual with a strong reputation to that of a team leader who encompasses emotional competence, professional authority, and communication skills.<sup>1</sup> Wright et al<sup>9</sup> identified attributes that are associated with being named as an excellent medical role model. These attributes include spending a considerable amount of time teaching, highlighting the importance of the doctor-patient relationship and also teaching the psychosocial aspects of medicine. However, Wright et al focused solely on physician role models. The attributes that

Wright et al identified may be applicable to surgeons, but there is no reference to other aspects of role modeling such as research capability, leadership, teamwork, professionalism, and a commitment to excellence, which may be considered important attributes of a surgical role model. Role models represent an important educational phenomenon encountered by medical students throughout their training, in the classroom, and in clinical settings. Students have a tendency to select traits from many role models and therefore derive their internal values from a variety of sources, including their own personal values and principles.<sup>10</sup>

## Role model versus mentor

It must be highlighted that the role of a mentor differs considerably from that of a role model. A mentoring relationship involves an exchange of communication and guidance, whereas in the case of a role model there may be no explicit supervisory relationship. A mentoring relationship usually involves the mentor acting as a coach and playing an active role in guiding junior colleague. A role model may not have any explicit role in relation to a learner, yet his/her actions and attitudes may be unconsciously or consciously observed by juniors and can lead to emulation of approaches and practices.

Singletary<sup>7</sup> described mentorship as a process that can be learned and stated that mentors should be given appropriate time and funding to develop their communication, time management, negotiation, presentation, and teaching skills.<sup>7</sup> Aspiring surgeons of today may require multiple mentors, including mentors for research, clinical surgery, and personal development. Such mentorship provided by multiple mentors is termed mosaic mentoring.<sup>11</sup> Another form of mentoring that should be considered is collaborative or peer group mentoring. Peer mentoring implies an approach to mentoring in which there is no power gap between the mentor and mentee (ie, the mentorship is being offered by someone of similar status or experience). Peer mentoring is concerned with professional development through peer support and represents an excellent addition to more traditional forms of mentorship given the time constraints that consultants and senior surgical trainees often encounter.<sup>7</sup> Although role modeling and mentorship are clearly different roles, it is imperative that good role models should arguably also be good mentors. The remainder of this article explores different approaches to mentorship and role modeling and will examine how they might be applied in surgery.

## Mentorship in medicine

A systematic review published in 2006 looking at the role of mentorship in academic medicine concluded that

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