

Physician Leadership

Volunteerism among surgeons: an exploration of attitudes and barriers

Katharine L. McGinigle, M.P.H.^{a,b,*}, Peter M. Milano, M.D.^{a,c},
Preston B. Rich, M.D., F.A.C.S.^{a,c}, Anthony J. Viera, M.D., M.P.H.^{a,b,d}

^aSchool of Medicine; ^bPublic Health Leadership Program, School of Public Health; ^cDepartment of Surgery; ^dDepartment of Family Medicine, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: In a recent survey, the American College of Surgeons found great interest in surgically related volunteerism, but it was unclear if the interest reflected participation. The purpose of the current study was to explore attitudes and barriers to volunteering.

METHODS: To assess surgeons' experiences and beliefs about volunteerism, we mailed a questionnaire to Nathan A. Womack Society members. We analyzed respondents' demographics and attitudes, and associations between physician characteristics and volunteer status.

RESULTS: The response rate was 42.5%. More than half (56%) of respondents volunteered surgical skills at least once, and 48% actively volunteer a mean of 9 days per year. Full-time practicing status was associated with being an active volunteer (57.8% vs 17.2% not full-time, $P < .001$). Modifiable barriers were identified.

CONCLUSIONS: Many different kinds of surgeons volunteer their surgical skills, reflecting the interest found by the College. Knowledge of barriers can be used to develop strategies to help interested surgeons pursue volunteer interests.

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Healthcare-related volunteer work can address access problems for uninsured Americans and many others living in developing countries. Recognizing this, over the last 5 years the American College of Surgeons has focused more attention on the promotion of surgical volunteerism.^{1,2} To examine the extent of participation and interest in surgically related volunteer activities, in 2002 the American College of Surgeons surveyed the portion of its members who indicated they would like to receive a questionnaire. The American College of Surgeons found that half of the respondents

volunteered internationally and 70% volunteered domestically.¹ Based on the promising survey results from both active and potential surgical volunteers, the organization created Operation Giving Back, a comprehensive web-based resource center where surgeons can find information about volunteer opportunities (<http://www.operationgivingback.facs.org>).³

Despite this support, it is unclear whether actual participation in volunteer activities reflects the high level of interest demonstrated in the American College of Surgeons survey. Very little has been published on volunteerism in surgical fields, and most of the articles detail the benefits of a particular volunteer experience.^{4–6}

Identification of barriers that deter surgeons from participation in volunteer activities may allow development of strategies that increase interested surgeons' ability to par-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-919-966-4389; fax: +1-919-966-0369.

E-mail address: mcginig@unch.unc.edu

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ticipate. This study explored attitudes towards volunteerism and barriers to volunteering among members of a professional organization of surgeons, along with personal characteristics associated with being a volunteer, and the current level of participation.

Methods

This cross-sectional study assessed surgeons' opinions of and experiences with surgical volunteerism. Surgical volunteerism was defined as sharing one's expertise with those in need outside of the usual work setting and without concern for financial gain.

In April 2007, a mail questionnaire was sent to all 628 members of the Nathan A. Womack Surgical Society, a professional organization of all surgeons who have worked or been trained at University of North Carolina Hospitals. One week later, a reminder postcard was also sent to all 628 potential participants. After 3 weeks and again after 6 weeks, nonrespondents were sent another identical questionnaire.

The questionnaire was modified from a previously used questionnaire commissioned by the American College of Surgeons and designed by the Institute of Health Policy at Massachusetts General Hospital.¹ The modifications included more detailed questions regarding background demographic and career information, past volunteer experiences, and the inclusion of a volunteerism elective in surgical residencies. The questionnaire was piloted on 4 attending surgeons currently working at University of North Carolina Hospitals in the Trauma/Critical Care Division. One of these surgeons and a non-physician also participated in cognitive interviews during the development of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire included 4 sections: volunteer experience, beliefs about surgical volunteerism, demographics, and volunteer opportunity database.

Analyses were performed with the statistical package STATA 9.0 (Stata Corp, College Station, TX). The demographic characteristics of respondents and their attitudes and barriers to volunteerism were examined in relation to volunteer experience. Differences in proportions in the bivariate analyses were tested with the chi-square test, and levels of $P < .05$ were considered statistically significant. The Institutional Review Board of the Office of Human Research Ethics at the University of North Carolina approved this study.

Results

A total of 267 of the 628 surgeons surveyed returned completed questionnaires (42.5% response rate). Respondents' mean age was 54 years, and the majority were male (87.3%), in full-time practice (74.2%), and with specialty training (85.4%), especially in plastic surgery (17.4%) (Table 1).

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents (n = 267)

Characteristic	Mean (SD) or percent
Mean age, y (SD)	54 (13)
Age category	
≤50 y	46.5
>50 y	53.5
Sex	
Male	87.3
Female	12.7
Pre-MD background in volunteerism	
Yes	67.6
No	32.4
Practicing status	
Full-time	74.2
Part-time	2.7
Retired	19.3
Other	3.8
Work affiliation	
Academic	42.2
Private	52.3
Military	0.4
Other	5.1
Specialty	
General	14.6
Subspecialty	85.4

Of these respondents, only 29% had heard of the American College of Surgeons' Operation Giving Back program. Over half (56%) had volunteered their surgical skills at least once since the completion of their surgical training, 48% had volunteered in the previous year, and 77% stated they would like to volunteer in the future. The surgeons who volunteered spent a mean of 9 days volunteering their surgical skills in a typical year.

Full-time surgical practice was the only surveyed characteristic that had a statistically significant association with active volunteering (57.8% of those in full-time practice volunteered where only 17.2% of those not in full-time practice did so, $P < .001$). Age, sex, specialty, work affiliation, and a pre-residency history of volunteer work were not associated with active surgical volunteer work (Table 2).

Respondents identified work and family obligations, lack of information about opportunities, and inconvenient volunteer times as the major barriers that prevented them from volunteering. Other possible barriers surveyed (amount of paperwork, employer's organizational rules, financial affordability) were not considered obstacles to volunteering (Figure 1). Using a 4-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree, respondents strongly agreed that when volunteering patients were appreciative (agreement score 3.28/4), the environment was collegial (3.19/4), and healthcare access was improved (3.16/4). There was also strong agreement that volunteering offered exposure to interesting operative cases (3.11/4) and provided opportunities for professional involvement after retirement (3.16/4). Respondents also thought that admirable physicians are volunteers (3.04/4), all physicians should volunteer (2.66/4), and that there

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