

Enhancing Medical Curricula: The Role of a 1-Day Plastic Surgery Course as an Educational Adjunct for Medical Students

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INTRODUCTION: Plastic surgery is underrepresented in medical school curricula. The St George's Surgical Society hosted a 1-day undergraduate course in plastic surgery. Our aim was to introduce students to plastic surgery and teach basic plastic surgical skills.

METHODOLOGY: The skills day consisted of lectures from consultants and a core trainee followed by registrar-taught workshops in suturing, tendon repair, and local flap design. Precourse and postcourse questionnaires assessed perceptions of plastic surgery, confidence in performing basic plastic surgical skills, and usefulness of course components.

RESULTS: Many perceptions of plastic surgery saw statistically significant changes. The belief that plastic surgery covers a wide range of specialties increased by 36% ($p = 0.01$). A -32% change ($p = 0.00$) was seen in the perception of plastic surgery only being pursued as a career for financial gain. Delegates reported greater confidence in all components of basic plastic surgical skills. The most useful activity was reported as performing surgical skills on real tissue.

CONCLUSION: A 1-day course can significantly increase positive perceptions of plastic surgery, dispel preconceived false stereotypes, while improving student confidence in performing basic plastic surgery skills. It is important that university surgical societies provide opportunities for student education, to aid informed decisions about future careers. (J Surg Ed ■■■■-■■■. ©2017 Association of Program

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COMPETENCIES: Medical Knowledge, Practice Based Learning and Improvement

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of medical training has meant that medical specialties are now selected at a much earlier stage of training than in the past. This choice is one of the most important career decisions we make. For specialties with lower profiles in the undergraduate curriculum, influencing this choice may be a challenge. Plastic Surgery is underrepresented in many medical school curricula¹⁻³ with only 3 of 23 United Kingdom medical schools (13%) incorporating the specialty into their curriculum in the 2005/2006 academic year.³ There has been a slight improvement in recent years, however in 2012, 60% of medical students still reported having had no exposure to plastic surgery.⁴ In addition, 85% of medical students were unable to name 5 conditions treated by a plastic surgeon.⁵ A survey showed that 30% of plastic surgery trainees decided on their specialty while still in medical school.⁶ Therefore, early perceptions of plastic surgery are fundamental in empowering students to make a sufficiently informed decision that will affect the rest of their professional careers. Medical undergraduates need to gain as much exposure to the specialty as possible, while receiving advice and mentoring from those already practicing. Lack of awareness may also have wider implications beyond fewer medical students choosing to specialize in plastic surgery, as it is imperative for all doctors

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to have a baseline understanding of various medical specialties for effective functioning within multidisciplinary teams. This is particularly important in light of recent recommendations by the Department of Health that 50% of medical students should become General Practitioners by 2015.⁷ Those who train in General Practice will manage patients who are seen by many other specialties, and understanding what these various specialties entail and the treatments they offer is essential to meet their patients' demands.

Choice of specialty is mainly influenced by 2 things. Firstly, preconceived ideas, and secondly, "positive exposure."⁸ There are many misconceptions surrounding plastic surgery, from it being a purely cosmetic specialty to it only dealing with very complex cases.⁵ Prior to medical school, exposure to plastic surgery is mainly through the media. Students are less likely to encounter the specialty from a medical perspective, which may explain the misconceptions. Exposure is considered one of the most significant factors in choosing a career in plastic surgery as a medical student^{8,9}; it dispels misconceptions and provides an opportunity for inspiration. This may be because of the experience gained, or because discussing the career with plastic surgeons provides greater understanding of what it entails.¹⁰ Positive consultant interaction also influences decisions regarding choice of specialty, with the consultants acting as role models to medical students.¹¹⁻¹³ Plastic surgery is typically selected as a specialty of interest in the third year of medical school,⁹ and therefore it is in these early years that positive exposure is essential.

Not every undergraduate has an opportunity to observe plastic surgery in the clinical setting, emphasizing the importance of specialty exposure by other media. Teaching imparts important skills while inspiring further interest in the field and prompts students to seek further opportunities within the specialty from an early stage.¹⁴ With the already saturated undergraduate curriculum, it is difficult to implement change in the teaching syllabus, hence the pressing need for alternative routes of exposure to plastic surgery, such as a 1-day course.

There may be a positive bias, with students attending these courses already having an inherent interest in pursuing a career in surgery, or specifically plastic surgery. Although there may be additional opportunities to explore the specialty within the undergraduate curriculum, such as student-selected components or student electives, 1-day courses can be a useful way to increase both knowledge and awareness of the specialty while nurturing medical students.¹⁵ The use of the courses is not restricted to medical students and have been used to give junior trainees an insight into plastic surgery with participants reporting greater career interest, and knowledge of what the career entails after course attendance.¹⁰

Professional organizations, such as the British Association of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, recognize and support the need for better representation of the specialty

among medical students. This was demonstrated by their hosting of an oversubscribed undergraduate course in 2009.¹⁵ Other institutions have also offered courses and received promising results.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

The St George's Surgical Society is a student-run organization aiming to promote surgery as a career, while providing opportunities for medical undergraduates to further their knowledge and exposure. We hosted a 1-day course to introduce medical undergraduates to plastic surgery, clarifying its breadth, outlining the opportunities it offers, and providing teaching on basic plastic surgical skills. This study assesses delegates' perceptions of the specialty, the surgeons working within it, and their own confidence in performing practical skills through reported outcomes before and after the 1-day course.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The St. George's Surgical Society Plastic Surgery Skills Day took place on 4 February 2017 at St. George's, University of London (SGUL). A period of 3 weeks was assigned before the skills day for advertisement of the event. All medical students currently enrolled at SGUL were invited to attend. A total of 27 medical students, from all year groups of medical school, attended the event each paying £20 to cover course administration. Delegates were asked to confirm whether they had previously completed a Basic Surgical Skills course.

The Plastic Surgery Skills Day took the format of lectures in the morning delivered by 2 consultants and a core trainee, followed by interactive surgical skills workshops in the afternoon. The aim of the morning lectures was to provide an introduction to plastic surgery and covered a range of topics, which included hand surgery, management of burns, skin cancer, breast reconstruction, and congenital abnormalities, followed by an overview of plastic surgery training from the perspective of a core trainee. The afternoon workshops (Fig. 1) comprised 3 skills stations, with a tutor-to-delegate ratio of 1 to 5:

- **Knot tying and suturing:** Following an introduction to the basics of instrument handling, a registrar taught the process of tying a basic surgical knot and a simple interrupted suture. Delegates were then individually taught any further suture techniques that they wished to learn. These included continuous suturing, vertical and horizontal mattress sutures, as well as subcuticular sutures. Teaching and practice took place on realistic gel suturing pads.
- **Local flap design:** After watching a short presentation and demonstration by a registrar, basic flap techniques were practiced on pork bellies.
- **Tendon repair:** The registrar described and demonstrated primarily the modified Kessler technique, which students then practiced on animal tendons.

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