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## Exploring residents' interest and career aspirations in global surgery



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Surgical residents increasingly seek global surgery (GS) experiences during training. Understanding their motives and goals is important to develop the optimal educational programs. A survey for surgical residents was developed to explore this interest.

**Materials and methods:** A survey administered in 2016 to residents in three surgical programs within the same academic institution assessed interest, prior global health experience, preferred training opportunities, and career goals in GS.

**Results:** Seventy-four surgical residents responded (78%) with 82% expressing interest in GS and 86% motivated by a desire for volunteerism. International electives (65%) and volunteer missions (49%) were the preferred experiences during residency over longer commitments such as advanced degrees. A majority of residents planned to incorporate GS into their career (76%) most commonly by volunteering on missions (70%) with a smaller group aiming for a career in GS (13%). Residents with prior global health experience ( $n = 27$ , 36%) showed greater interest in GS (96% versus 72%,  $P = 0.02$ ) and a commitment after residency (93% versus 68%,  $P = 0.02$ ), and trended toward greater interest in GS careers (22% versus 6%,  $P = 0.06$ ).

**Conclusions:** Institutional interest in GS remains high among surgical residents, motivated primarily by a desire for volunteerism. Following training, most residents plan to participate in short-term volunteer commitments, though a small group envisions GS as part of their long-term career goals. Prior global health experience is associated with interest in GS both in the present and long term. Providing these experiences early may be a strategy to support academic interest.

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## Introduction

Global surgery (GS), a once-neglected component of global health, has gained a new identity since the Lancet's 2030 report.<sup>1</sup> With this new recognition, an established demand for international opportunities has arisen among North American surgical residents. This demand may be significant enough to inform choice of training program.<sup>2-5</sup> In response, roughly a third of general surgery programs offer some form of international experience.<sup>3,6</sup> Opportunities provided are often unique, nonstandardized, and include participating in short-term surgical missions (STSMs), Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education-approved international elective rotations, GS tracks with or without advanced degrees, and research fellowship programs.<sup>3,7</sup>

At Rutgers, we have recognized a growing demand for GS experiences from our surgical residents, across our assorted surgical training programs. Although surgical residents increasingly seek international opportunities in many different forms and settings, the foundation of such interest and how it relates to the level of future commitment is not fully understood. Although previous studies have demonstrated this interest, mainly in regard to international electives, this survey goes beyond electives to include STSMs, advanced degrees, fellowship programs, and academic endeavors.

To better understand this growing interest and meet the desires of our residents, a survey was designed to explore the GS training models that surgical residents seek, their motivations, and their long-term plans in the field. We hypothesize that there may be identifiable factors that predict interest in or commitment to GS. Our aim is to elucidate such factors within our group of residents. We believe this information may be valuable for residency programs, attempting to establish GS curricula for their residents. It may also help departments recruit the appropriate faculty to facilitate these efforts.

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## Materials and methods

### Study population

All levels of the general surgery programs at New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School as well as the oral and maxillofacial residency at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) were included in our study.

### Study instrument and data collection

A 10-part paper-based survey was collaboratively constructed by faculty and surgical residents involved in GS at Rutgers University–NJMS, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and RSDM. Revisions to questions and answer choices were made based on review from group of faculty with experience in GS. The survey was administered in the spring of 2016. The survey inquired about demographics, level of interest, reasons for said interest, prior global health experience (GHE), training

opportunities preferred, and specific postresidency plans in the field of GS.

Closed-ended multiple choice questions were used, though several questions allowed for the option of writing in "other" responses to capture further qualitative data. The SurveyMonkey program was used for distribution and analysis.

### Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed with chi-square and Fisher's exact tests, using IBM SPSS software (version 23, release 23.0.0.0). Subgroup analysis was performed by program, prior experience in global health, gender, and postgraduate year (PGY) level to delineate factors associated with current and long-term interest in GS.

### Ethical considerations and Institutional Review Board approval

Surveys were anonymous and answered by residents on a voluntary basis. The Rutgers NJMS Institutional Review Board approved this study as exempt.

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## Results

Surveys were made available to 95 residents, with a 78% response rate ( $n = 74$ ). The residents were 68% male and 37% had prior GHE (Table 1). Eighty-two percent of residents were either slightly interested, interested, or very interested in GS. Although several residents had multiple motives, the most common reason for interest was "giving back by participating on surgical, medical, or disaster relief missions" (88%), versus religious motivation (8%), or long-term career goals (38%). Regarding opportunities residents preferred during their training, international electives (65%) and STSMs (49%) were ranked highest (Table 2). Following residency, 76% of respondents planned to incorporate GS into their future career goals, whereas 24% had no specific future goals in GS at the time of survey. Of those with plans following residency, 70% were interested in short-term commitments via STSMs, whereas a smaller proportion had the long-term goal of being a career global surgeon in either academia (13%) or working for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) (13%).

Subgroup analysis of factors associated with interest in GS demonstrated no difference by gender, PGY level, or specific residency program. However, a significant difference in GS interest was found between those with and those without prior GHE (96% versus 72%,  $P = 0.02$ ), respectively (Table 3). Past GHE was broadly defined and included medical/surgical mission work during residency (58%), volunteering during medical school or undergraduate (25%), advanced degree in global or public health (11%), and global health research (6%). Those with prior GHE more frequently planned for GS activities following residency (93% versus 68%,  $P = 0.02$ ) and were more likely to envision participation in STSMs after residency (89% versus 53%,  $P = 0.002$ ). Those with prior GHE showed a trend toward greater interest in pursuing an academic

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