

# Five things they don't teach you in medical school

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Accepted May 24, 2016

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DOI: 10.1503/cjs.006616

## SUMMARY

You graduate from medical school with dreams of beginning your residency, during which you will study and train within the specialty you love more than any other. While you may be book-smart at this point in your career, medical school does not teach you everything you need to know. During residency you will learn the didactic and technical requirements for your future staff job, but medical school won't explicitly address many of the crucial "dos and don'ts" of a successful 2- to 5-year postgraduate training voyage. Here we discuss a few of the important things about residency that you'll need to know that they don't teach you in medical school.

**M**edical school does not teach you everything you need to know for your residency. During residency you will learn the didactic and technical requirements for your future staff job, but medical school won't explicitly address many of the crucial "dos and don'ts" of a successful 2- to 5-year postgraduate training voyage. The following are 5 things you should know about residency that they don't teach you in medical school.

## 1. RESIDENCY IS A 5-YEAR JOB INTERVIEW

While residency may well be the richest learning environment of your career, it is also a 5-year job interview. Although perhaps an intimidating thought, this reality can be framed as an opportunity. Residents should be encouraged to take advantage of every possible learning juncture, because the reality is that once your residency is over, the density of your learning moments and your opportunity for supervised teaching in an open and rich environment decreases dramatically. In other words, the commonly stated 10 000 hours required to become an "expert" at a given task represent only the beginning of mastering the art of surgery.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that this time stamp substantially underestimates the required commitment.

Beyond the clinical opportunities to shine, it is also critical that trainees present themselves in a professional manner during residency. Specifically, arrive on time (or even early!) for every meeting and event, dress appropriately for clinical situations (remember that sick patients and faculty outside of your age demographic may not view your attire in the same way that you do), and treat the people around you (nurses, administrative assistants, housekeeping staff, porters, telephone operators, and other hospital staff) with kindness and respect. Engaging the operating room team via preparation for surgery by studying the relevant anatomy, procedural steps, preoperative imaging, and patient-specific variables relevant to the case at hand is critical for demonstrating a commitment to patient care and learning. Meeting the patient before the operation itself, for example, generates a bond that will not only help your postoperative relationship, but also make clear to the faculty that you understand the value of fostering good doctor-patient relationships. Remember that, in general, all of these people are working for

either the betterment of your patients and/or to enhance your personal education. The pillars of professionalism within your 5-year job interview are altruism, integrity, responsibility and respect. By remembering these principles, you will represent yourself well at all times and help develop your distinctive brand as a marketable and employable entity. At the end of the day, it does not take much more effort to stand out — when given an opportunity to do so, run with it! There will always be jobs, even in the toughest supply/demand cycles, for the cream of the crop surgical graduates.

## **2. SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS: LEARN TO PLAY WELL IN THE SANDBOX**

Collaborating effectively in a clinical, academic and administrative context is crucial to your success as a resident. You will need to interact in a professional manner with staff in other specialties for the betterment of your patients; engage in research projects to push your specialty forward (in addition to allowing you to stand out!); and work collaboratively with colleagues on a variety of tasks that maintain a practice, such as creating call schedules for you and your colleagues. Each of these endeavours is made easier and more pleasant if performed with mutual respect among colleagues. You will see some of the best examples of collaboration among your surgical faculty, as well as some of the worst. Learn from both the good and the bad, and apply what you've learned into your daily practice. Also remember that being a leader and ensuring strong relationships requires effort when you're tired, honesty when it's uncomfortable, and especially integrity when it's difficult. Learning how to function and collaborate in a team is an absolute requirement in modern medicine. The days of Han Solo are long gone, so engage your teammates with enthusiasm and a "can do" attitude. Remember that surgery (of all types) is a "can do" business. Do your best to include and refocus team members who focus on negative thoughts, obstacles and reasons why things can't be achieved. You have the equivalent of a doctorate in pragmatic solutions and problem solving as a surgeon; let your skill set shine through in both the clinical and nonclinical arenas. This must be balanced, however, with knowing when others cannot be refocused. In these instances, you may need to move past them with minimal drama and focus on accomplishing your goals.

## **3. START THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE NOW**

While it feels like you're just starting the voyage from an education standpoint, your residency will pass you by in what seems like a flash. Months seem like days, and then you're done and it's off to a fellowship or practice.

While you don't have to commit to a specialty just yet, frame each rotation with that possibility in mind. Seek out rotations and elective time that allow you to explore specialty areas that might interest you. Go where the best training is — always! Taking advantage of moving around for rotations and/or electives in other centres (i.e., to different cities and programs) provides you with a lifelong improved understanding of things that can be successful and what leads to failure. This remains true in both a clinical and structural context. In every learning environment, surround yourself with mentors who are driven to change the world. These hyper-performers tend to cluster together like moths to a light, so follow the light! In general, faculty surgeons want to help you land in a career choice that you love, so take advantage of their insight, expertise and experience. The surgical world is small, so connections and first-hand testimonials are incredibly important when applying for your fellowship or first job.

## **4. CONTROLLED AMBITION AND DRIVE IS A GOOD THING**

Most successful surgical residents (and faculty) are ambitious and want to please others. These are generally great character traits as long as they are harnessed in a productive and nonobtrusive manner. Enthusiasm (i.e., that "can do" attitude) and effort for the purposes of self-advancement are among the most important characteristics of all successful residents. While the dominant and immediate goal of each and every training day must be providing high-quality detailed care to our patients, the educational and relationship benefits we can obtain from these goals are nearly endless. Wanting to impress your bosses, move forward in your careers and generally shine is natural and a large part of what has brought you this far. As with so many other concepts, your faculty want you to succeed and are willing to invest considerable time and energy in you. The key concept here, however, is "controlled" drive. Take a breath, think before you speak, come prepared, communicate with a professional and nonpressured style, and use faculty to your academic and clinical benefit. Medicine is full of smart and connected people with long memories. They are paying attention and quietly identify those surgical residents who reflect on both their errors and successes, invest in patient care, soak up feedback (regardless of its form), and clearly want to do well.

## **5. REMEMBER TO HAVE FUN AND ENJOY YOURSELF**

The truth is that we are all incredibly lucky to work as surgeons in any capacity. It is a true honour and privilege to have the opportunity to engage in such a special and intimate relationship with sick patients. Whether achieving a cure or saving a life is the goal, you will often

represent the last bastion of hope for a sick patient. We are also permitted to engage in a surgical relationship that would constitute aggravated assault (at best) outside of the operating theatre environment. Treat every patient like he or she is the most important person on earth at that instant. It is a privilege to cut, to cure, and to lead. Surgery is in fact one of the very few occupations that allow an individual to achieve “flow” where time seems to slow down and all of our distractions fade away.<sup>2</sup> Although residency is tough and full of daily challenges, we should meet each hurdle with an inner smile and a sense of optimism. Squeeze every bit of life and enjoyment out of each day.

In summary, medical school teaches us a lot, but it does not teach us everything. By following the advice outlined above and gravitating to those faculty members who are hyper-performers, you have the opportunity to

start a surgical career that will engage you, challenge you, and fulfill you with a lifetime of clinical, academic, and friendship opportunities.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

**Contributors:** All authors contributed substantially to the conception, writing and revision of this article and approved the final version for publication.

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## Canadian Surgery Forum

The Canadian Surgery Forum will hold its annual meeting Sept. 14–17, 2017, in Victoria, BC. This interdisciplinary meeting provides an opportunity for surgeons across Canada with shared interests in clinical practice, continuing professional development, research and medical education to meet in a collegial fashion. The scientific program offers material of interest to academic and community surgeons, residents in training and students.

The major sponsoring organizations include the following:

- The Canadian Association of General Surgeons
- The Canadian Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons
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- The Canadian Society of Surgical Oncology
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