

## **Career Counseling in Surgery Frequently-Asked Questions**

This booklet has been prepared by the Department of Surgery in response to questions frequently asked by medical students who wish to explore the training and career opportunities in this field. We hope that it will be helpful to students and serve as a basis of discussion in individual meetings with faculty members and residents.

- **Can you give me a brief description of the field? What are the key elements of this field that define it?**

All of the surgical specialties involve the care of patients through surgical procedures as well as a medical management of diseases that lend themselves to surgical management. These fields require a high level of dexterity, self confidence and a commitment to the patient that includes both pre and postoperative care.

- **What is the patient population that I will encounter? Will it include both children and adults? Will there be emergency work? What types of technology will I encounter?**

The patient population varies tremendously and runs from newborns to the geriatric population depending on the field of surgery and diseases can range from severe, immediately life threatening conditions such as trauma to routine elective cosmetic surgery depending on the discipline. Technology plays a large role in surgical procedures and is constantly evolving requiring continuous education and skills development throughout one's career.

- **Is it possible to describe the personality characteristics of many physicians in this field?**

Most surgeons tend to have deep commitments to their patients, are a bit obsessive, decisive and self confident.

- **How long is the training program/residency?**

General Surgery Residency is a 5 year program with multiple fellowships that can follow

- **Are there fellowships available after residency?**

yes

- **How do I know if my academic record/grades will make me a suitable applicant?**

The easiest way is to meet with an advisor from the department and review your record with them. They will be happy to share their honest opinion of your competitiveness.

- **What is the role of my USMLE Step 1 score? What is a competitive score to qualify for an interview? If I failed Step 1 what are my options? Should I take Step 2 early?**

Although each program varies in their approach to screening applicants, generally speaking a minimum score of 210 needs to be achieved for the least competitive programs. Higher scores are necessary for more competitive program. Most programs do not look at step 2 seriously as it is assumed if you have made it past the initial screen, you will have no problem with step 2

- **Do I need a Step 2 Clinical Knowledge score to be screened for an interview? To be ranked?**

Generally yes, but some programs may not require it.

- **Is there anything that I can do in my rotation or elective experience in this field to enhance my qualifications?**

A Research experience will benefit you and help you but will not make up for poor grades or a bad academic record. Truly personalized letters from well known academic surgeons go a long way in promoting your application

- **Should I take outside electives in other institutions? If so, how many are advised and allowed?**

Outside electives should be tailored to each individual students needs. Electives can be done as audition electives at potential programs or as a way to get a letter from a national figure in your field.

- **If your field requires a preliminary year what are your recommendations regarding that year?**

The preliminary year is built into the categorical programs in general surgery. Preliminary years are required for some of the subspecialties

- **Is a research experience important in my application to this field? Do I need to do a one year research experience? Will research offset a low Step 1 score? Should I have publications to qualify for your field?**

Research will benefit your application but will not make up for deficiencies in your application. You do not need a separate year of research with a competitive record and rarely will a year of research overcome a very weak academic record

- **Is community service important in my application to this field?**

Community Service is helpful and demonstrates a commitment to the field. Surgical Experiences are best. Again, community service will not make up for bad grades and letters rather it will only help sort out equally capable applicants.

- **What do you advise on obtaining letters of recommendation? Should they all be from the field? How many should I have? Do I need a chair's letter? If so, how do I obtain that letter?**

A minimum of 2 letters from Surgeons are required and a third letter can be from a non surgeon with unique knowledge of you and your abilities (i.e. research). If possible a letter from a nationally recognized surgeon will help as their letters are well known and easier to interpret. Letters should come from people that are best able to write meaningful letters that demonstrate a real understanding of the applicant, rather than just a reiteration of a file. Students interested in General Surgery should meet with chair of the department as soon as possible in their medical school career to help the department develop a relationship with the student and allow the departments' faculty to better understand the student and his unique needs and qualifications which will help produce the best possible letters.

- **How do I meet with residents in the field and ask them to share their experiences and advice? Can I find residents with educational backgrounds similar to mine?**

The best way to find residents to discuss surgical training is during your surgical rotations when you are working together. Specific residents with similar educational backgrounds can be identified by the program director should you desire that.

- **If I want to learn more about the field, can you recommend how I do that?**

The best way to learn about the field is to work with surgeons. This will allow you best assess your ability to fit into the specialty. Each specialty also has web sites such as the American College of Surgeons web site ([www.facs.org](http://www.facs.org)) which has a medical student section and web based resources for medical students..