Cosmetic Surgery Training in the United Kingdom

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To an average uninitiated UK medical student thrown headlong into the world of hospital medicine, the world of plastic surgery might seem to belong to pinstriped glory-hunters seeking financial rewards, if his or her experience of the specialty is derived solely from popular mass media. One certainly hopes that this perception would drastically change by the time that the student completes three years in clinical medicine, but without proper training, this isn’t always the case.

Knowledge of our specialty is important to any surgical trainee, as it deals with the science and art of wound healing. The basic principles of wound healing and aesthetics are useful for all specialties, not just cosmetic surgery. Appropriate understanding of the plastic surgeon’s role allows for more effective referrals to the department of plastic surgery. In addition, the surgical management of skin cancers is undertaken by plastic surgeons in collaboration with their dermatology colleagues, so establishing a cooperative relationship during training is essential.

Exposure to our specialty in medical school can be instrumental in allowing students to make an informed choice in terms of their career path. Inspiring mentors can attract students, and contact with plastic surgeon role models can go a long way toward encouraging students in a particular specialty. Medical students can then direct their extracurricular efforts to their specialty of choice.

Green and May,¹ in their survey of plastic surgery residency applicants, concluded that exposure to the specialty during training was the most influential factor in helping medical students decide to embark on a career in plastic surgery. They also emphasized the importance of having this exposure before the third year of medical school. In the United Kingdom, the time spent in surgical training has been shortened as a result of the European Working Time Directive and the Modernising Medical Careers reforms, so it has become particularly advantageous for trainees to make an early choice of career pathway, even during medical school.

To address the shortcomings in the undergraduate courses, student-led surgical societies in the United Kingdom regularly conduct practical workshops and lecture-based tutorials for the benefit of their undergraduate members. For example, Imperial College School of Medicine Surgical Society offers “Basic Surgical Skills for Medical Students,” a series of practical workshops in plastic surgery techniques taught by plastic surgery trainees and well-recognized lecturers. The thrill of learning suturing methods and performing basic flaps and Z-plasties on animal skin is a major attraction for many. The society is also offering, on a trial basis, weekend seminars on underexposed surgical specialties (eg, plastic surgery). These programs provide students with time in the operating theater when the weekend teams are on call. The British Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons also supports students undertaking research or electives in plastic surgery through their “elective awards.”

Although such adjunct programs are important in furthering the specialty, it is incumbent upon medical schools to educate students about all potential specialties and subspecialties, including plastic surgery. Some schools are fulfilling that duty; Imperial College London offers three-week optional special study modules in plastic surgery (hand surgery and craniofacial surgery). Granick et al² discussed the need for required clinical clerkships in American schools, which has led to an improvement in student awareness of plastic surgery in the United States. However, more can be done in both the United Kingdom and the United States by way of incorporating plastic surgery rotations within the curriculum as a starting point. As

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plastic surgeons, we must be the ambassadors of our specialty, encouraging medical students to explore the world of cosmetic surgery and supporting them as they make informed choices in their surgical careers.

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**REFERENCES**
