

REFLECTIONS

The Surgical Society of the University of Cape Town – a society on the cutting edge

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The Surgical Society of the University of Cape Town is a student-run society established in 2006 and is affiliated with the Department of Surgery. The aims of the society are to supplement undergraduate training, to promote medical and surgical research, and to motivate students to pursue a career in surgery. Regular monthly lectures and surgical skills courses are offered, as well

as weekly anatomy workshops. A recently launched Surgery Shadow Programme enables students to interact with practising surgeons in theatre, thereby gaining insight into the advantages and challenges involved in a future career in surgery.

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The Surgical Society of the University of Cape Town (UCT) is a student-run society affiliated with the Department of Surgery at Groote Schuur Hospital under the patronage of the Head of Surgery, Professor Delawir Kahn. It was established in April 2006 by 7 UCT medical students and is now one of the largest UCT societies, with over 700 members. Its core objectives include exposing students to interesting surgical topics that add to and supplement undergraduate training, promoting a culture of medical and surgical research among students, and providing surgical education. The society also aims to motivate students to pursue a career in surgery, and set up contacts with other surgical societies locally and internationally, and provide solid surgical role models to students.

The Executive Committee aims to provide members with activities and experiences to enhance their development and interest in all aspects of surgery, research and leadership. The society hosts exciting events throughout the academic year, including: surgical lectures by leading academic and private surgeons; basic and advanced surgical skills courses; opportunities to 'shadow' a surgeon to learn during operations; anatomy workshops; and surgical research opportunities.

The monthly lecture evenings cover diverse topics from various surgical fields to broaden students' knowledge, and inspire them about a future career in surgery. The society provides refreshments to create a relaxed environment for students to interact with surgeons and sponsors who may have erected a promotional stand. Students support these evenings with great enthusiasm, as confirmed in a study by previous committee members, revealing that interest in careers in surgery have increased since the initiation of these events. These talks further students' education in surgery beyond the curriculum, and create a sense of academic camaraderie and faculty pride.

In 2011 the society launched the Surgical Shadow Programme, enabling students from all years to be mentored by an established surgeon for a week during the mid-semester vacation. Its rationale

was to enable students to interact with surgeons and their surgical teams in theatre, in the public and private sector, allowing them to gain insight into the lifestyle of the surgeon, including advantages and challenges. Students were provided with a unique opportunity to interact with surgeons on a one-on-one basis, to gain invaluable advice and insight. The programme has been received with enthusiasm by students and surgeons alike and promises to be a successful venture, inspiring the future generation of surgeons and fulfilling one of the society's main goals. Another goal is to support female students to become successful surgeons. The Surgical Shadow Programme allows them to learn from respected female surgeons, thereby providing them with suitable professional role models. In addition to learning from senior colleagues, students can learn about balancing family life and career, an aspect that worries many aspiring female surgeons. A survey has shown that female students found the surgical community to be less male-dominated than they had expected, allaying concerns about the difficulty experienced by women in acquiring a surgical registrar post.

Recently the society introduced a research portfolio with the aim of creating a bridging relationship between student members of the society and research opportunities with the staff of the Department of Surgery. One of the biggest challenges facing students setting out to begin any research is not knowing where – or even how – to start. Experienced academic surgeons are aware of what research has been conducted in their field and therefore know where potential opportunities may lie. Initial contact is forged between the student and the surgeon, who thereafter provides the necessary support throughout the rest of the research process. This initiative, although only a year old, has already fostered a number of ongoing research projects. It has also captured the Faculty's attention, and is beginning to expand to other departments including the Department of Medicine.

Monthly basic and advanced surgical skills courses are offered, teaching an array of skills including basic surgical technique, surgical knot tying, suturing using porcine tissue, removal of foreign bodies from tissues, dissection of mesenteric lymph nodes and anastomosis of porcine bowel. In the coming year, laparoscopic skills training courses will be available for senior society members – the first time such training has been made available to students.

Anatomy teaching workshops are held on Saturday mornings in the Department of Human Anatomy. Each session focuses on a particular field of surgery and the relevant anatomical areas, with applicable cadaver dissection and surgical demonstration. The most recent venture was undertaken at the recently opened Karl Storz Surgical Skills Centre at Red Cross Children's Hospital (with

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Professor Johan Fagan leading a head and neck surgery course and demonstrating a parotidectomy, facial nerve dissection, and submandibular gland excision). Sponsorship has been obtained for four more such workshops in 2012.

The past 6 years have been immensely successful for the UCT Surgical Society, with future ideas and opportunities gaining momentum. The society has supported local universities, such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of the Witwatersrand, in establishing their own surgical societies, and was recently contacted by the University in Barcelona, Spain, which has modelled their new surgical society on the UCT Surgical Society.

Young though the UCT Surgical Society may be, it has received great accolades, and has expanded through student initiative under senior guidance. The society has gained notable national and international recognition. There can be little doubt that it will continue to grow as we move into the second century of the UCT Medical School.

For more information on the UCT Surgical Society see: <http://www.surgsoc.org>.

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