

Global Health Interest Among General Surgery Residents



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Introduction

Surgery has long been neglected in the global public health arena¹, but evidence is accruing for the enormous global burden of surgical disease². At the same time, interest has been growing among both practicing and future surgeons-in-training to improve access to surgical care in developing countries. A national survey administered to resident members of the American College of Surgeons showed that 92% of respondents would be interested in an international elective during residency, and 85% plan to offer volunteer services during their future practice³. Several formal, structured international surgery rotations have been implemented within U.S. surgical residencies, and other fellowship and volunteer opportunities for global surgery are emerging⁴. In order to better understand the international surgery goals and interests of our own general surgery residents, we designed and administered a global health interest survey.

Methods

A simple 10-question survey was designed for the initial assessment of global health interest among categorical general surgery residents in the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJUH) program. Information was collected on previous global health experience, current interest in a global health program during residency and future career interests in global health. Response format was mainly binary (yes/no) with provision of free-text commentary as well for many of the questions. The survey instrument was administered from October 2010 to January 2011, primarily through the online program Survey Monkey. A link to the online survey was sent to all categorical residents via email. In order to augment the response rate, a few of these surveys were also printed and distributed as hard copies during conferences. All responses were anonymous.

Results

27 out of the 36 total categorical residents in the RWJUH program completed the survey – a 75% response rate. Responses were fairly evenly distributed across all PGY levels.

97% of respondents would support a global health curriculum within our residency. While only 25.9% had previously participated in global health programs, the majority (88.9%) were interested in getting involved at some point during their career. Furthermore, all of those surveyed would support fellow residents who chose to take 2-4 weeks of elective time to participate in global health initiatives, specifically noting that the best times would be during their mandatory research year or their PGY-4 year.

In the subgroup of residents who planned to contribute to global health in the future (n=24), the most preferred endeavor was volunteering surgical services (91.7%). Other activities that attracted major interest included practicing surgery abroad (regardless of location) (66.7%), volunteering trauma services (62.5%), practicing surgery abroad in developing nations only (50%), and training the physician and healthcare workforce (50%). (Figure 1) We also asked this subgroup how much time (a minimum and maximum amount) they would want to spend abroad working on a global health initiative. Because we left this question open-ended, we received a variety of responses ranging from one week to years. We also did not specify whether the minimum or maximum amount of time was a one-time, lifetime, or annual experience. Most residents responded with an absolute amount (e.g. 1 week) whereas others specified an annual amount. It is difficult to accurately infer the full meaning of these responses without more detailed or probing questions, however the results are conservatively presented in Figure 2 based on the shortest amount of time stated (i.e., “1 week/year” was placed in the 0-1 week category; “few weeks” was categorized as > 2 weeks – 1 month; etc.) For those who stated they would participate yearly, we also placed them into the annual category. Most residents – 68.4% – indicated a minimum time of less than 4 weeks long, and 61.9% indicated a maximum in terms of months, ranging from 1 month to 6 months. As previously mentioned, some of them may have intended to serve their minimum or maximum amount of time on an annual basis. 28.5% would be willing to spend a maximum time in terms of years, and more than 20% said that at minimum, they would volunteer on an annual basis.

Figure 1. Types of Global Health Interests Among General Surgery Residents

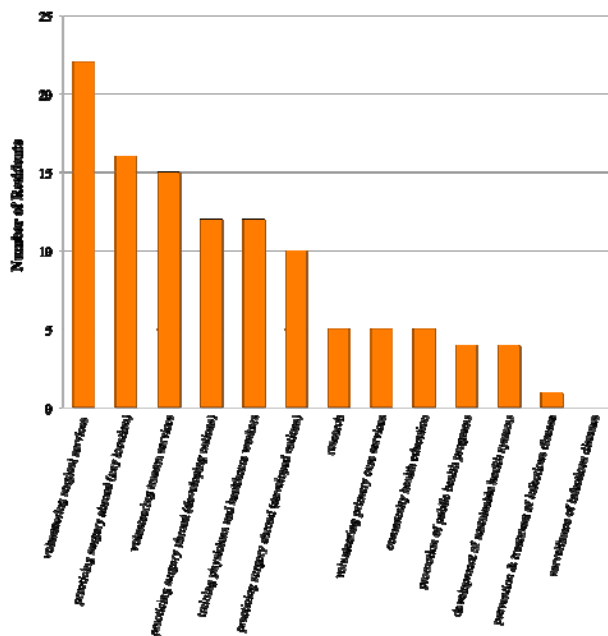
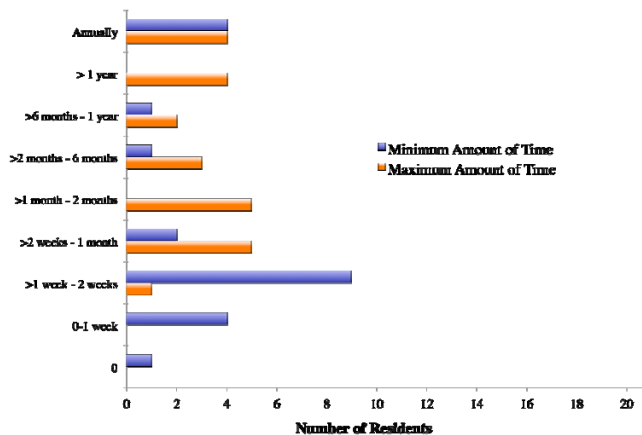


Figure 2. Amount of Time Surgical Residents Want to Spend on Global Health Initiatives



Results (continued)

The mandatory research, or surgical investigator (SI) year in our program falls between the PGY-2 and PGY-3 year and endows residents with an opportunity for career development through research or other professional work. 79.2% said they would want to spend part or all of that year participating in a global health program or global health research. Senior residents who had already completed their SI year reflected positively on such an option.

“...it would be nice to have the possibility,” (PGY-4)

“If I had that opportunity, it would be great,” (PGY-5).

66.7% residents would even be willing to use part of their vacation time to partake in global health programs. One resident remarked:

“If there were an attending who were performing or organizing a medical mission trip to perform surgeries and services I think it would be a wonderful learning opportunity if a resident or two were able to go,” (PGY-1).

Although residents were certainly enthusiastic regarding the prospect of a global health program within the residency, they were also realistic and identified barriers to engaging in global health activities, including scheduling conflicts, inadequate financial resources, and a lack of relevance to their overall career goals.

“Clinical responsibility makes that very difficult to arrange. The funding would also be a problem,” (SI).

“Part of the year may be beneficial, however for most who are going to obtain fellowship here in the US or practice here it may seem distant or not directly helpful.” (PGY-1).

Conclusions

The results of the survey indicate that there is tremendous interest and support for global health among Robert Wood Johnson general surgery residents. Much of this interest pertains to providing surgical care, and given that the majority of these young physicians would like to participate in such activities in their future careers, it would be beneficial for them to have that opportunity and experience available during their training. We will need to ask more detailed questions, perhaps in the format of focus groups or individual interviews with interested persons, in order to gain a better understanding of what our residents desire from a global health experience and what concerns they may have prior to or during the experience. Their responses will be used to guide the development of our global health program, which may in turn serve as a model for other residencies at RWJUH as well as other U.S. surgical residencies. Our hope is that by introducing global health into their training early on, our residents will continue to incorporate it into their practice throughout their careers.

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