An Informed Decision

Surgical Interest Group is the opportunity of a lifetime

By S. A. Unger

“By giving it the financial support and boost it needed,” she says. “He always comes to the first or second meeting of the year and introduces himself and the department. He just makes the whole department a lot more approachable. We owe him a lot.”

“I found that the surgeons were some of the most compassionate physicians with whom I had ever worked,” she says. “They were intellectually and technically outstanding, and there was an esprit de corps that was really unparalleled. So I spent the rest of my third year desperately trying to like anything else as much as I liked surgery.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.

Medical students get the majority of their information from their peers,” she says, and they often have many misconceptions about surgery.

“I swore I would never become a surgeon,” she recalls with a laugh. “I thought that surgeons were technicians. I thought they were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

“I thought I would never train in surgery, and since then the number has averaged 17.

“Surgery is a viable career option before they form negative opinions.”

“I thought that surgeons were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

“I found that the surgeons were some of the most compassionate physicians with whom I had ever worked,” she says. “They were intellectually and technically outstanding, and there was an esprit de corps that was really unparalleled. So I spent the rest of my third year desperately trying to like anything else as much as I liked surgery.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.

Medical students get the majority of their information from their peers,” she says, “and they often have many misconceptions about surgery.”

“I swore I would never become a surgeon,” she recalls with a laugh. “I thought that surgeons were technicians. I thought they were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.

Medical students get the majority of their information from their peers,” she says, “and they often have many misconceptions about surgery.”

“I swore I would never become a surgeon,” she recalls with a laugh. “I thought that surgeons were technicians. I thought they were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.

Medical students get the majority of their information from their peers,” she says, “and they often have many misconceptions about surgery.”

“I swore I would never become a surgeon,” she recalls with a laugh. “I thought that surgeons were technicians. I thought they were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.

Medical students get the majority of their information from their peers,” she says, “and they often have many misconceptions about surgery.”

“I swore I would never become a surgeon,” she recalls with a laugh. “I thought that surgeons were technicians. I thought they were insensitive. I harbored all of the same stereotypes that many of the student do. As it turns out, by poor, dumb luck I ended up at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was reputedly the hardest, most difficult rotation—and I absolutely loved it.”

Talking Shop

N ITS CURRENT FORMAT, the Surgical Interest Group meets one evening a month on the South Campus in the Lippshutz Room. On average, 30 to 60 students attend, most of whom are in their first or second years. A meal, free of charge, is catered to all attendees, including participating faculty and speakers.
For each meeting, two or three surgeons from various specialties are invited to talk to the group about why they chose their specialty, what their training involved, what their work life is like, and how their career impacts their home and family life. Following the talk, students have an opportunity to ask questions.

The current format for the meetings was determined by unexpected input from students, according to Hollands. She explains that at a meeting several years ago, she announced that a special “women’s night” would be held once a year so that female surgeons from different specialties could come to talk to the women in the group about family issues and how they have found ways to have a “normal life” as a surgeon.

“After I announced that, a student recalls Hollands, “the guys started quickly coming up to me, one on one, and asking, ‘Could I come to that meeting?’ I’d really like to know about those things, too.” So we finally decided that we would ask all speakers to talk to the students in groups about why they chose their specialty, and how they got involved in the field, so that students have the opportunity to ask questions.

At the start of each year, students in the group are provided with a list of surgeons who have agreed to provide such opportunities. Currently about 30 surgeons in a wide array of specialties are participating, and students are encouraged to initiate contact via email. For Stone—a native of Rockland, New York, who attended Drew University, where he majored in neuroscience—this is a particularly exciting aspect of the program. Over the summer, he worked with her to conduct research on laparoscopic appendectomies in the pediatric population.

Currently, Stewart is in the process of applying to general surgery residency programs, and U of B is one of her top choices. She feels her experience with the Surgical Interest Group and her one-on-one contact with Hollands have been integral to her preparation for this next phase in her education and training.

“When I began shadowing Dr. Hollands, there was a moment in the OR when I said to myself, ‘This is what I want to do,’ ” Stewart recalls. “I didn’t tell anybody because they would say, ‘Oh, yeah, you still have a year and a half before you get to your third year,’ but, really, in the OR that day, my heart started pounding and I got so excited—I just knew that I wanted to do surgery.”

The connections students make through the group and its shadowing program often segue into informal mentoring and networking opportunities, notes Stewart.

“I’m the type of person who likes to see results and see them quickly—at times I’ve maybe even been embarrassed about that because it could be labeled ‘impatient,’ ” she says, laughing. “But when I started attending the Surgical Interest Group meetings and heard the surgeons speak, I really felt like I was with like-minded individuals, and I felt like I was home, because I could take these qualities about myself and turn them into a useful thing!”

“I was involved with the case,” she says, “because they are very different [career paths] and this is definitely a big part of how people decide what they want to do with their lives.”

During her first year of medical school, Stewart met Hollands, and in addition to shadowing her, she worked with her to conduct research on retractable appendectomies in the pediatric population. Currently, Stewart is in the process of applying to general surgery residency programs, and U of B is one of her top choices. She feels her experience with the Surgical Interest Group and her one-on-one contact with Hollands have been integral to her preparation for this next phase in her education and training.

“Dr. Hollands, there was a moment in the OR when I said to myself, ‘This is what I want to do,’ ” Stewart recalls. “I didn’t tell anybody because they would say, ‘Oh, yeah, you still have a year and a half before you get to your third year,’ but, really, in the OR that day, my heart started pounding and I got so excited—I just knew that I wanted to do surgery.”

Stewart emphasizes that the shadowing program is essential to her preparation for this next phase in her education and training. “When I began shadowing Dr. Hollands, there was a moment in the OR when I said to myself, ‘This is what I want to do,’ ” Stewart recalls. “I didn’t tell anybody because they would say, ‘Oh, yeah, you still have a year and a half before you get to your third year,’ but, really, in the OR that day, my heart started pounding and I got so excited—I just knew that I wanted to do surgery.”

Ashley Stewart, Class of 2008

Jonathan Stone, Class of 2010

The clinic is held in a lab dedicated to this type of training, located on the South Campus in the Biomedical Research Building. During the clinic, students are assisted not only by surgeons, but by other health professionals such as surgical nurses and technicians. Although not all of the students who participate in the Surgical Interest Group decide to pursue a career in surgery, the group devotes time during the second semester of each year to providing students with information they will need should they wish to prepare for a match in surgery.

“Dr. James Hassett, director of the residency program, presents a session in January on how to apply for and obtain a surgical residency,” explains Bullard Dunn. “This is a very pragmatic overview that covers such things as when to fill out your applications, what sort of letters of recommendation you need and what types of programs to apply to—all of which is very useful for fourth-year students.”

“Toward the end of the academic year, the group also hosts a panel of residents and a panel of fourth-year students who have matched in surgery,” explains Bullard Dunn. “These closing sessions bring full circle an exploratory process that is well guided and structured, from start to finish.”

In summing up what his experience with the Surgical Interest Group means to him, Stone reflects an attitude that is conducive to more interested UB students choosing to enter surgery, many of whom, if given the opportunity, would like to stay and train in Buffalo.

“Although you scratched the surface of surgery,” he says, “I already want to dive more deeply into it with my whole heart, and I also want others to be able to see what the [field] can offer.”

Students or faculty who are interested in participating in the Surgical Interest Group can contact Kelli Bullard Dunn, M.D. via e-mail at Kelli.BullardDunn@RoswellPark.org or by phone at (716) 845-4191; or Jonathan Stone, Class of 2010, at jjstone@buffalo.edu.