

Career Resources

Missionary surgery

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Cross-cultural
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Giving back

Abstract. A career in missionary surgery offers professional challenge, much opportunity, and high job satisfaction. Preparation, financial support, job requirements, and difficulties are issues to be considered. However, these are secondary in the context of seeing needy people made whole physically and spiritually.

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If you are looking for a surgical career that is professionally challenging, filled with the unexpected, confronted by doors of opportunity, and offering tremendous job satisfaction, missionary surgery is the answer. This article describes the practice and work in an overseas setting, the preparation necessary to do this work, and some of the obstacles that may be encountered.

The current American concept of a general surgeon does not define the general surgeon working in a Mission Hospital, which is usually located in a developing nation. The clinical practice may include urology, orthopedics, thoracic surgery, obstetrics-gynecology, and other surgical subspecialties. Often, technology for diagnosis and management is lacking, and clinical skills must be honed and further strengthened. This type of practice allows the surgeon the excitement and challenge of learning new procedures and management.

The primary responsibility of the missionary surgeon is patient care. The facility may be the only one or the best one serving a large population. Therefore, some patients present very complex problems. This is compounded by the fact that the people may have difficulty in accessing the care, have a low level of education, and present only with advanced disease.

Teaching is another aspect of the professional challenge. There is great need for training and mentoring national surgeons who may be young and inexperienced. Some mission hospitals have residency training programs and undergraduate teaching as well. The effectiveness of the missionary surgeon is multiplied as he/she trains others.

In the overseas setting, the unexpected is an almost daily

experience. The surgeon will assume roles that he/she did not anticipate and for which he/she is not prepared. Administrative responsibility is common. Other jobs may include counseling, construction and maintenance supervisor, equipment mobilization, fundraising, community leadership, and coordination of volunteers. Innovation is required in every area. The missionary surgeon is key not only in his/her own professional area but also in the functioning of the Mission Hospital as a whole.

The doors of opportunity are always there, although some doors open and close rapidly. There are opportunities to enhance surgical practice standards in the community or nation. There are clinical research opportunities that will become evident. The wide variety of pathology seen gives opportunity for documentation and reporting, but the greatest opportunity is to invest in people including patients, national colleagues, young professionals, and the community.

The surgeon may engage him/herself in missionary surgery as a long-term career choice or on repetitive short-term trips with practice based in the United States. Those working long-term sustain the work, administer the hospital, and invest in the development of the institution. The volunteers who come for a few weeks are vital to train missionary and national physicians, to encourage the staff, and to provide future support in money, equipment, and prayer.

Preparation

When considering a career that includes work internationally, preparation begins early. An awareness of world events, geography, and social and political issues

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provide more understanding of needs. Short-term experience as a medical student and as a resident may be important in clarifying the career path.

The residency should be done in a busy surgical training program giving a broad base of experience that will better prepare the surgeon for the variety of cases that will be encountered often in an isolated place with little equipment. Board certification in general surgery should be completed before going overseas. This may be required for visa or work permit or local license. Maintaining licensing and certification in the United States is also important when the missionary surgeon returns home.

Any prior cross-cultural experience will help the missionary to be more comfortable in the new culture and environment. Reading books and articles about communication and work in other cultures is also helpful. Once the country for work has been identified, the reading becomes focused on the people, religion, and culture in that place. Language acquisition will be essential for the long-term missionary surgeon and should be initiated either before going or upon arrival in the country.

Sending Agencies and Support

Many mission societies or agencies operate hospitals or have the ability to place surgeons in positions overseas. This can be researched thoroughly on the Internet. A general web site with information is <http://www.rightnow.org>. Religious denominations have overseas mission boards with medical work and may be contacted through the church. Other contacts include the following: (1) Africa Inland Mission, PO Box 178, Pearl River, NY 10965; (2) SIM USA, PO Box 7,900, Charlotte, NC 28241-7900; (3) World Medical Mission, Samaritan's Purse, PO Box 3000, Boone, NC 28607; and (4) Christian Medical and Dental Associations, PO Box 7500, Bristol, TN 37621.

Most agencies provide a network of prayer support but not financial support for the missionary. Therefore, the missionary is responsible to generate his/her support from churches and individuals that can be sustained for the period of service overseas. A few agencies do provide subsistence salary and benefits such as insurance and retirement programs for personnel. It is usually required that debts be cleared before departure. Project MedSend may offer loan repayment grants to career overseas medical personnel after reference and documentation from the sending agency.

Difficulties

There are some difficulties inherent in a medical missionary career. These will vary from place to place and even from time to time. A few of these are listed below in no particular order of priority.

1. *Communication*: Even with language facility, communication cross-culturally is an ongoing learning experience that is lifelong.
2. *Continuing medical education*: In a remote place with a very heavy work schedule, this is difficult but is possible online and by correspondence. The Christian Medical and Dental Associations offer excellent meetings annually either in Africa or Asia.
3. *Government restrictions*: Obtaining medical licensing in the country may be difficult. Strong nationalistic attitudes affect policies. In some places, there are examinations in the local language that must be passed. Some even require the internship to be done in the country. The missionary should be aware of the requirements before going.
4. *Limited equipment and supplies and infrastructure*: The real challenge is to adapt and adjust without ever compromising standards of care.
5. *Funding*: The missionary will probably be required to raise money for his/her own support and/or for the support of the hospital.

Conclusion

Life as a missionary surgeon results in high job satisfaction. The desperately ill patient with no other source of care who goes home well, the young aspiring surgeon whom he/she trains who then goes out and multiplies his/her effectiveness, and the destitute young lady who becomes a nurse with his/her help are glimpses of people who make the hard work and sometimes difficult circumstances more than worthwhile. All of this is secondary in comparison with the primary reason for choosing this career path. The main task is sharing one's Christian faith, and the greatest reward is seeing people made whole physically and spiritually.

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