

GENERAL SURGERY RESIDENCY

I will never forget the mortification I felt when I broke one of my father's prized antiques at age 12. The 19th century Imari porcelain bowl had been declared an "intangible cultural treasure" by the Japanese government and was irreplaceable. Fortunately, I was able to carefully glue it back together and paint over the cracks so that no one could really tell it had been broken. My ability to perform this seemingly daunting and painstaking task reflects a captivation with fixing things that my mother tells me was apparent even before I could walk. I grew from a child who found joy in learning to use tools and was adept at taking toys apart and putting them back together again into a young adult who built complicated models of military vehicles and ships and diagnosed complex mechanical problems in repairing automobiles. As a medical student I was fascinated to learn how muscles, nerves, vast branches of arteries and veins, and organs worked together to maintain the functioning of the human body (in my anatomy classes at RCSI, I was always the first one in the room with scalpel and tweezers ready). Not surprisingly, I have found my niche in surgery, where my patience, deftness of hand, and attention to detail are critically important skills. However, general surgery is a perfect fit for me not only because of my aptitude for using the precision tools and technologies of the operating room, but also because of my gift for connecting with patients and their families.

In looking to my future, I consider my interpersonal skills to be of equal importance to my technical skills. During the course of my clinical rotations for Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), my preceptors have been pleased to see the care I take in explaining procedures, conditions and medications to my patients and answering all of their questions. They have complimented me on my warm and personable communication style, my compassion, and my responsiveness to patients' needs and concerns. These attributes

enable me to calm distressed patients and earn the trust of patients and members of their family; this will be fundamental to my surgical practice as surgeons are routinely required to deal with fear and trauma. In addition, my cross-cultural awareness augments the rapport I am able to build with patients. The experiences that have cultivated this awareness include immigrating to Canada from Hong Kong at age 5; attending an international school in Budapest, Hungary as a teen-ager ; studying medicine at the RCSI in Dublin; and completing clinical rotations in Ireland, Canada, China and the United States. I have had opportunities to form relationships with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and walks of life, which has exposed me to different worldviews and social norms. The understanding I have gained helps me to identify where my patients are coming from and address cultural, religious or economic issues which are pertinent to their care. While this and the other qualities of character I have mentioned on their own qualify me for little, they are precious because innumerable years of school cannot be guaranteed to teach them and money cannot buy them – without these qualities, I doubt I could ever be more than an average surgeon.

My people skills, manual dexterity and technical prowess all factor in to my decision to pursue a career in general surgery, but this decision also hinges upon an additional key motivation which is particularly compelling. That is, although I enjoyed all of my clinical rotations, general surgery has been the most engaging by far, for a number of reasons, and I welcome the challenges that go with it. First of all, the sometimes frantic pace and emotionally-charged atmosphere of the OR stimulates rather than exhausts me because I have a high level of energy, a keen mental focus, strong stress management skills, and a quick response time (which I also demonstrated as a volunteer for the Vancouver Crisis Centre). Second, I learn new procedures and integrate new knowledge quickly. For example, the very first time I sutured an incision, the surgeon commented that “he couldn’t have done it better himself”; the incision was 8 cm and I was being closely observed by two surgeons and a

scrub nurse, but I still managed to avoid puncturing the skin or poking myself. Third, I am a strong team player, and teamwork is particularly vital in the OR, where life can hang in the balance and decisions must be made and carried out in a matter of minutes. In my view, the fine-tuned coordination of anaesthesiologists, surgeons, nurses and other healthcare professionals that surgery requires is an art as well as a science. When I am immersed in this process, I am able to support my team by remaining relaxed and on-task in circumstances of urgency, and I recognize the importance of maintaining a sense of humour as well a positive attitude.

In closing, I wish to emphasize that I have put considerable forethought into assessing that I have the skills, discipline and clarity of purpose to succeed as a general surgeon. Although the hours will be long and the demands rigorous, my work ethic, fortitude, and dedication to the highest quality of multidisciplinary patient care will sustain me. I basically love all that surgical practice entails and know that at end of the day, this practice will consistently give me a profound sense of accomplishment and fulfilment.