



Australasian Students' Surgical Conference 2018

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The Australasian Students' Surgical Conference (ASSC) enables New Zealand and Australian medical students to congregate and share their passion for surgery. On 4–6 of May 2018, a contingent of ten New Zealanders went to Sydney, with all but one from the University of Auckland. The first evening comprised of registration and an opportunity for our New Zealand delegates to mingle with fellow health professionals who shared a common interest in surgery. Delegates then had the privilege of attending a careers evening, where various surgeons gave talks regarding the paths they had taken to get to where they are today.

The first speaker was Professor Mohamed Khadra, a urologist currently practicing in New South Wales, who was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2017. Following Professor Khadra, a panel of consultant surgeons from orthopaedics, neurosurgery, cardiothoracic, plastics, vascular, colorectal, and paediatrics talked about what drew them to surgery and why they still thought they had the best jobs in the world. The common theme between all the guest speakers was the passion they shared for their respective livelihoods. Each could pinpoint a mentor, a team, or a moment when they knew which specialty they wanted to enter. The talks concluded with an opportunity for networking with fellow students and surgeons. During the networking session, it was a pleasure to be able to go up to these surgeons and ask them questions, even though as a pre-clinical student it was a little intimidating. Not having been around consultants, it was a pleasant surprise to experience the kindness and understanding they showed towards what may have seemed like amateurish questions.

Saturday morning involved a speech from Dr James Toh, a colorectal surgeon. He talked about how we could define evidence-based health care through innovation and research. As a pre-clinical student, I felt that we had not had enough exposure to these kinds of talks, with our main learning focus on the basic medical sciences. It was refreshing to think about our future and the environment we would be working in. The next keynote featured Professor Peter Neligan, a plastic surgeon who spoke about the recent advances in his field, and discussed the diversity of surgeries that could now be done. His interests lie in reconstructive microsurgery, lymphatic surgery, and facial reanimation, among other subspecialties. The two keynotes enabled me to see two different perspectives on medicine. One focussed on research and how it would help future patients, while the other looked at medicine from a completely surgical lens, seeing the benefits to a patient as, for all intents and purposes, instant. It made me consider both and question whether

I saw myself as heading down either of those paths. After this, we had a research presentation competition that involved Liam Ferguson and Eve West, two students from the University of Auckland. Ferguson presented on surgery around the lymphatic system and ischaemia causing multiple organ failure, while West presented on ophthalmology, and was the winner of the research competition.

The afternoon consisted of a variety of skills sessions that allowed us to talk to surgeons in a small group environment. We also tried our hands at some surgical techniques and listened to other surgeons talk about their experiences in the profession. One of the sessions was on laparoscopic surgery where the task included picking up beads using the laparoscopic instruments. The lack of depth cues made performing this feat no easy task, which reinforced my appreciation of the skill and dexterity required by surgeons that use this technique. One of the more hands-on workshops, led by neurosurgery registrars from Sydney, involved learning how to create emergency burr holes to reduce intracranial pressure. Simulation tools were available and everyone was given a turn to try and create a hole without damaging the dura mater. Other practical workshops included learning how to replace heart valves, and an orthopaedic-led discussion on the steps involved in performing a hip replacement. As always, there was a session on suturing. The patience exhibited by the surgeons who lead these workshops fostered a fantastic learning environment that enabled us to clarify any doubts we had and refine our suturing skills. They were informative, exciting, and a great challenge. Saturday night involved the gala ball, which was held at the Hyatt Regency in Darling Harbour. The venue overlooked the harbour bridge and the night was topped off by great company with excellent food.

The next morning was the Golden Scalpel Games. This is a competition with teams from the different schools in Australia and one New Zealand team. The New Zealand team consisted of Aditya Arora, Cameron Wells, James Penfold, Liam Ferguson, and Vanamali Joseph. Although they did not take the trophy home, they undertook different tasks such as laparoscopic simulation, diagnosing a patient in a trauma scenario, selecting and applying a cast, suturing, and conducting a wound debridement.

In the afternoon, we had a panel of surgeons who conducted a question and answer session, touching on the barriers to becoming a surgeon. A pertinent question that was asked was regarding the mental health of

those undertaking surgical training and whether the different colleges had a responsibility to support them. It received a large round of applause and it was clear that this was an issue that sat in the minds of many of the delegates who might have been considering surgery as a future career. The surgeons did their best to answer it and recognised mental health was a significant issue in the field. They acknowledged that the various training colleges did have a supporting role to play and that they intend to improve the reintegration process for those trainees who take time out of their respective programmes. One of the last keynotes was given by Dr Adil Haider from Harvard, who spoke on unconscious bias and how it influences our decisions. His charisma captivated the audience and encouraged us to think about the implicit biases that we might carry and what we could possibly do about them.

In short, the weekend was one of self-discovery, learning, and networking. The interactions with delegates and surgeons made this conference a stand-out as we were all keen to learn from world leaders and our fellow students that we would be working with in the future. The conference enabled me to look beyond the lecture theatre and potentially see myself one day in the operating theatre. I came home with a new energy and enthusiasm for the privileged medical training that we receive. In 2019, the ASSC will be held in Melbourne and I encourage all medical students, regardless of their interest in surgery, to attend.

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