

So you want to be ... a vascular surgeon

Introduction

For those who are dedicated to a career in a surgical specialty, vascular surgery is attractive for many reasons. There is close patient contact that is rarely achieved in other surgical specialties, elegant surgical operations that can often make the difference between life and death, and exciting new developments in the field of endovascular surgery. Many are put off, however, by common misconceptions of vascular surgery borne out in terms such as the 'fem-dismal' operation, 'salami slicing amputations' and 'ascending chiropody'.

The attractions

As a vascular surgeon you will see patients in the clinic directly from the GP and follow each individual patient through the course of their investigation, diagnosis, decision making and definitive management – in contrast, for example, to gastrointestinal or cardiac surgery where patients are often referred with a diagnosis. This close, often personal relationship with the patients is a very attractive side to vascular surgery.

The surgical procedures are often mentally challenging and demanding. They require meticulous technique and attention to detail. The range of operative procedures is vast, and few specialties can claim to perform an equivalent range of procedures. The work spans the range from emergency, difficult aneurysm surgery to the infinitely more precise, planned high-risk carotid endarterectomy. There is great satisfaction from prolonging life with some of the surgical procedures such as aneurysm repair or allowing patients to regain function in a limb after bypass procedures.

Mr Colin Bicknell is Specialist Registrar, North West Thames and **Mr Tahir Hussain** is Consultant Surgeon, Northwick Park Hospital, Harrow HA1 3UJ

Correspondence to: Mr C Bicknell

Training

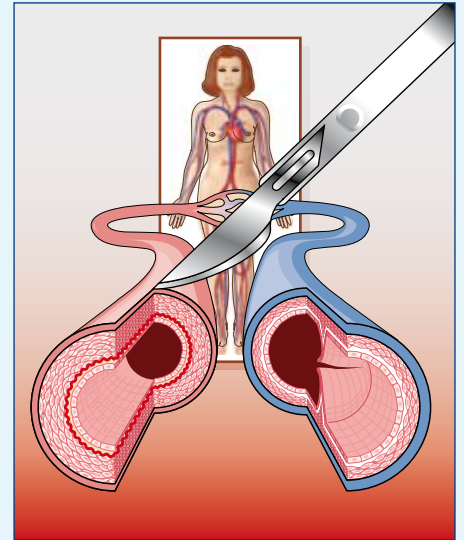
At the current time vascular surgery is undergoing somewhat of a revolution. New innovation in the field of endovascular therapy is an ever-expanding field. Recently large trials of endovascular aneurysm repair have been completed and a number of aneurysms are being tackled in this way. Carotid stenting is developing rapidly and the number of critically ischaemic legs being treated with subintimal angioplasty is also increasing. Rather than this being the death of vascular surgery as some surgeons claim, this is a chance to revolutionize the way vascular disease is treated. And it is vascular surgeons that are at the forefront of these changes.

It is difficult to say what the future of vascular surgical training will look like with the advent of the Modernising Medical Careers programme. It is likely that vascular surgery training will be linked to other surgical specialties in the early years but trainees will quickly move into a dedicated vascular surgery pathway to consultant level. This dedicated training pathway will allow time for vascular surgeons to learn many of the skills required to perform endovascular procedures.

The vast majority of vascular trainees are actively seeking tuition and believe learning how to perform these skills should be mandatory. The new vascular surgeon will have operative and endovascular skills that complement each other and mean a varied, challenging workload.

The downsides

There are downsides to any profession and vascular surgery has its fair few. Much of the work is urgent or emergency cases



occurring with alarming regularity and often in the small hours of the night. Operations can go on for many hours and may need revising even after this. Vascular surgeons need to be unflinchingly optimistic. To cap it all the consultant is invariably required to participate in the vast majority of the cases and rarely is asleep at home while on call.

Once the operation is finished the widespread nature of vascular disease means the patient will almost always require a high degree of input into cardiovascular, renal and respiratory systems as well as managing the operative site. Time-consuming patients and the unpredictable nature of the work mean that family life may suffer, but with the advent of vascular on-call rotas and specialization this is only likely to get better.

Want to do it?

Vascular surgery is demanding, can be frustrating and downright depressing, but the rewards are great. If it still sounds attractive the best thing to do is to talk to your vascular surgeon and find out more, get some experience of surgery and operative skills and apply for the relevant jobs. You may regret the decision often but overall you won't want to change. **BJHM**

KEY POINTS

- Vascular surgery is a specialty with a varied, interesting workload.
- There are high levels of emergency work.
- Downsides include time consuming, long operations, sometimes with still unsatisfactory outcomes.
- Pessimists need not apply.