

Making the most of theatre time

Introduction

As part of their surgical teaching block, most medical students find that they have the opportunity to go to the operating theatre to assist or watch various surgical procedures. This can be a rewarding setting in which to learn about surgical and perioperative care, but many students do not take full advantage of the educational opportunities available and are often uneasy about being in a different environment within the hospital. However, with the right approach and a few useful tips, you can maximize your precious time spent here, and get to see and do more. This article gives a guide to making the most of your theatre time.

Always see the patient in advance

It is always worthwhile seeing any patient about to undergo a surgical procedure beforehand. This does not have to take long, but you should take a history, perform an appropriate examination and look up any relevant blood tests or imaging. By following the patient from diagnosis to the operation, you are able to view the surgery in the context of the patient's condition, rather than seeing the surgery in isolation.

Patients undergoing elective surgery are normally seen beforehand in the pre-assessment clinic. These clinics are often staffed by specialist nurse practitioners who are usually happy to let students assist, shadow or see patients themselves. This setting offers an opportunity to witness how patients are worked up, particularly from a cardiorespiratory perspective, and how decisions are made regarding the suitability of patients for surgery.

Befriend the theatre staff

The theatre workers of any operating department are really the essential nuts

and bolts that keep everything working, so it is worth introducing yourself to them at the earliest opportunity. The theatre nurse in charge is usually a good first port of call. Theatre staff can be useful in distilling essential tips such as where the changing rooms are and where to find the right operating theatre for your patient. They can also direct you to the coffee room – a useful place to be while waiting for your patient to arrive! In addition, they can teach you how to properly scrub and gown up – an essential skill to master before being allowed to assist in operations.

Brush up on your anatomy

Before you step into the operating theatre, take a moment to read up on the anatomy of the area being operated on. Usually, a good time to do this is while sitting in the coffee room waiting for the patient to arrive to theatre. Don't be surprised if your surgical colleagues ask you about any relevant anatomy – this seems to be an almost universal experience.

Common questions include 'what layers am I cutting through?', 'what is the blood supply of...?' and 'what are the relations of this structure?' You are unlikely to be quizzed about minor anatomical details so don't worry too much about these. Simple anatomy recall will do – you would be surprised at how easily impressed surgeons can be!

A more important reason to brush up on the relevant anatomy is that it will make the experience of being in theatre more beneficial if you can relate the anatomy to both the pathology and surgery being performed.

It is also worth reading a bit about the operation itself. A useful system of thinking about any operation, regardless of scale or specialty, is in terms of the following categories:

- The main indications for the operation
- The risks, benefits and possible complications of the procedure, which should be always discussed with the patient beforehand as part of gaining consent. If you are able to, accompany the surgeon as he/she talks through these issues with the patient. It provides an

excellent opportunity to witness the use of different communication skills and how the patient's concerns and questions are handled.

- The operative procedure itself.

Befriend an anaesthetist

If you have the opportunity, spend some time in the anaesthetic room watching the patient being prepared for theatre. Apart from the anaesthesia itself, there are other things to see such as central line insertion, cannulation and patient ventilation. You may even have the chance to help the anaesthetist.

If you haven't managed to scrub with the surgeon or it is a particularly quiet period during the operation, then approach the anaesthetist who, if you ask politely, can talk you through various aspects of peri-operative care and physiology such as fluid balance and gas exchange.

Follow the patient

The operation does not end when the surgeon closes the wound. There is a temptation to walk off once the surgery has finished, but if you wait with the patient, you can follow him/her into the recovery room and see how he/she is managed in the immediate postoperative period. Some patients require transfer directly to an intensive care or high dependency unit and this offers the potential to see how these patients are cared for in a more specialist environment.

The patient should also be seen on the ward and daily thereafter until discharge. By doing so, you are able to chart the natural history of the patient's postoperative recovery, together with the common problems and issues encountered and any late complications that may develop.

Hop onto other operating lists

During any normal working day, there are plenty of elective operating lists running concurrently. If you want to increase your exposure or simply fancy seeing a different surgical procedure, then approach either the theatre sister or the appropriate surgical team to say that you are keen to come along. Most of the time, they will be happy to accommodate you

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and may even be able to use your help. Again, make sure that you have seen the patient beforehand and have some knowledge of the procedure.

Another good way of getting more quality theatre time is to stay back after normal working hours when you may have the opportunity to see patients undergo emergency surgery. The best way to do this is join the on-call surgical team who can inform you which patients are on the emergency list. Given that this is a less busy time of the day, you also have a greater chance of assisting.

In some instances, it may not be possible to join other operating lists so easily.

For example, moving from a theatre with a patient who has meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* to an orthopaedic theatre poses a serious infection risk and will not do you any favours with the theatre staff. Therefore, it is paramount that you seek the permission of the theatre sister beforehand.

Be enthusiastic

Making the most out of your theatre time is really a case of the more you put in, the more you will get out of it. If you show that you are keen and interested, then it is more likely that you will have the chance to participate. By showing some initiative,

you can also take advantage of the countless learning opportunities on offer. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

KEY POINTS

- Spending time in theatre offers a valuable opportunity to learn not only about surgery, but various aspects of perioperative care and applied basic sciences.
- With the right approach and a little initiative, you can maximize the time you spend in the operating theatre.