

MB/PhD: don't forget the 'BS'

Sir,

In the UK there remains unmet demand for translational research in surgical science. Worryingly, since the turn of the millennia the number of clinical academics in surgery has fallen by 17%, with the proportion of lecturers falling by almost a third (Medical Schools Council, 2013). Initiatives to boost academic surgery must also contend with shortcomings in funding, which in 2009 stood at less than 2% of overall health research budgets (Royal College of Surgeons of England, 2011). The MD/PhD training model is well established in the United States, supporting sustained progress in clinical science. Through immersion in doctoral research, MB/PhD programmes at the University of Cambridge and University College London have enabled graduates to participate in translational advances in both medicine and surgery (Cox et al, 2012; Stewart, 2012).

However, expansion of the UK MB/PhD network remains limited with less than a quarter of these graduates entering surgical specialties. Expanding MB/PhD opportunities in surgical disciplines could serve as the foundation for a revitalized academic surgical community. Investment by surgical organizations, academic fund-

ing bodies and other donors to support MB/PhD student projects and career development could boost the volume of basic science, translational and clinical surgical research being undertaken. Such a strategy could enable well-trained academic graduates to enter the integrated postgraduate surgical training pathway, building on this sound academic base.

However, student ambition to undertake an MB/PhD is influenced by undergraduate educational content and exposure to research, particularly during an intercalated year. Greater medical student exposure to surgical research and participation in projects is therefore needed. Initiatives to encourage this, like the intercalated research awards hosted by the Royal College of Surgeons of England (2013), are welcomed. Student concerns over 'committing' to a particular field early, financing and interrupting their undergraduate medical education may be additional perceived barriers which require attention.

Despite these challenges, with interest in UK MB/PhD programmes growing and demand for surgical careers high, expanding surgical research opportunities for MB/PhD students (both formal and self-organized) could harness this potential to further advance surgical science and improve patient care. As medical students in the UK study for a Bachelor of Medicine (MB)

and Bachelor of Surgery (BS), we believe this should be reflected in the availability and distribution of MB/PhD research opportunities. Investment and support for MB/PhD opportunities in surgical science could act to close the gap between medical and surgical research; inaction could let it widen further.

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