

Title: How to get ahead: Young colorectal Surgeons reflect on their first few years in practice

Background: The transition from surgical training to surgical practice is critical. Residency instructs trainees in surgical skills and patient care, but often lacks instruction in practice building or early career development. Because of this, many young surgeons are left with little information about how to progress their early career. This study sought to identify and characterize young colorectal surgeon beliefs about professional development and early clinical practice.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were performed with board-certified colorectal surgeons. Responses were qualitatively analyzed and converted to coded, categorizable data. Subjects were recruited via snowball sampling method.

Results: 22 colorectal surgeons were interviewed. Surgeons described practice environments as academic (77%), private (18%), or military (5%). 86% of surgeons were happy with their career progression, 82% were happy with their operative volume, and 82% were happy with their mix of cases. Strategies to improve career progression were congregated into three types: those used during the job search (14%), those employed once at an institution (39%), and those independent of a specific job or institution (53%). For those who were unhappy with their career progression (14%), the biggest barriers were a lack of mentorship and practicing in an oversaturated market. In regards to case mix, less than half of surgeons (45%) believed they had any control over their case mix. However, surgeons were split as to whether a broad range of cases (50%) or specializing in one particular niche (50%) was more effective for career advancement.

Conclusion: Young colorectal surgeons were mostly content with their career advancement, operative volume, and case mix. They employed a variety of strategies to promote career advancement and practice development. The majority of these strategies focused on activities performed after obtaining a job. The biggest barriers to career advancement were lack of local mentorship, an oversaturated health care market, and time to perform the parts of their job that would lead towards promotion. All of which, potentially, could be negotiated during the job search. Given this, young surgeons should identify factors they feel will be responsible for their success ahead of the job search and explicitly prioritize them.