Clinical Congress: The Journey of an International Medical Student

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Discussion points:

1. Role of International medical conferences in aiding the transformation of a medical student into a doctor.
2. Should medical conferences and exchanges be made compulsory as a part of a global medical curriculum?
3. Lacuna of research in developing countries.

The experience

The theme of the Clinical Congress, 2016, organized by the American College of Surgeons (ACS) at the Washington Convention Center in DC, was “Challenges for the Second Century”.

I was awestruck the moment I walked into the humungous registration area where eminent surgeons had gathered to attend this fabulous event. With my Id and hobby badges, I also received a beautiful Clinical Congress conference bag that mandated a selfie. My first international conference is not just an experience but a journey from naive outlook towards surgery to a broader view of life itself.

The conference comprised of exclusive sessions for medical students aspiring to pursue surgery and the Clinical Congress which was a platform for continuing medical education for surgeons.

Medical student program (MSP)

An enthusiastic welcome and orientation lecture was followed by three days of exciting panel sessions.

From the leadership arena, we had the pleasure of being addressed by Dr. Courtney Townseed, the President, ACS, 2016-17; Dr. Valerie Rusch, the Chair; ACS and Dr. Ajit Sachdeva, Director - Education, ACS. They threw light on the path that lies ahead for surgeons, the ample opportunities and the tireless efforts by the ACS in ensuring the making of top-notch surgeons. Best put by Dr. Rusch, "Excellence has no boundaries".

The session “Life as a Surgeon, Living YOUR Dream!” had me intrigued from the title itself. It emphasized that female surgeons do not have to choose between career and family. Surgery demands perseverance as well as maintaining a dynamic equilibrium in work-life balance and contrary to popular belief, a surgeon too can have it all.

“Surgery Interest Groups” elaborated on how these groups help improve the skills of medical students in clinical years and guide the preclinical year students with the basic suturing and surgical techniques. The resident panel, chaired by Dr. Paul Schenarts on “Decision
Making on the Path to Residency and Beyond", was immensely helpful for medical students interested in a surgical residency in the United States. The panellists got candid with the medical student audience and shared their personal experiences and tips to help in the matching process.

There were also a lot of inspiring talks at the conference. One that I liked was an introduction to Global Surgery by Dr John Tarpley, a surgeon who is breaking boundaries to utilise his surgical skills in third world countries. He illustrated the environment in developing countries to ensure students are well prepared and do not get a cultural shock after commencing rotations. I was also impressed with Dr. John Cameron’s poise and interesting presentation on "William Stewart Halstead: Our Surgical Heritage" as it connected me to the roots of surgery and elucidated the traits of a great surgeon.

Each day of the MSP ended with a roundtable session followed by the networking receptions, over food and beverages. Students, seated at the tables representing the field of interest, could address their doubts directly to the administrators, surgeons, and Residency Program Directors.

One of my personal favourites, the "Mastering the Surgical Residency Interview" session followed by a mock interview practice with leading surgeons, laid emphasis on braving the Interview - the Do’s and Don’ts, dressing and etiquette tips and communication skills. My mom often quotes, "There is many a slip between the cup and the lip", and believe me, I understood that this is the slippery ground people talk about, when referring to the matching process.

Meanwhile, the networking receptions with Program Directors and surgery residents, were great opportunities to interact, learn about various programs, and the fellowship matching rate of the institutes. The networking reception gave us a one-on-one time with the residents, letting us freely express any doubts that we had about surgical residencies and the residents were honest and easy to approach.

However, I must confess, the Convocation Ceremony, with décor and a stage set to honour the new President of the ACS, was the cherry on the cake. The Presidential Address, swearing in ceremony, Initiation of new Fellows, followed by all of them graciously marching out of the ballroom, with glistening, proud smiles and family and friends waiting to congratulate them, was an indelible sight.

Clinical congress

No successful athlete reaches his/her moments of glory without putting in hours of hard-work and training. The distinguished surgeon, Dr. Edward Verrier emphasized the, “10,000-hour training” for becoming successful. He befittingly named this lecture, “The Elite Athlete... the Master Surgeon”, to honour one of the giants in Cardiothoracic Surgery, John H. Gibbon, Jr, who dedicated timeless hours to develop and perform the first open-heart operation with the use of a heart lung machine.

"Icons in Surgery", paid a tribute to the Bariatric Surgeon Dr. Walter Pories and Paediatric Surgeons Dr. Kathryn Anderson and Dr. W. Hardy Hendren. Dr. Pories is famous for his work on the ‘Role of Zinc in Healing’ and the ‘Greenville Gastric Bypass’. It was a privilege to be addressed by Dr. Anderson, who is a luminary for women in surgery. She is a pioneer of oesophageal replacement in infants and children and the first woman to be elected President of the American Paediatric Surgery Association. Dr. Hendren, who famously goes by the nickname 'Hardly Human', revolutionised Paediatric Surgery: repair of genitourinary defects- cloaca and megaureter repair being some of his most famous contributions. These surgeons truly are surgical icons and it was nothing less than a blessing to be in that hall, giving them a standing ovation.

Cutting-edge research sessions like 3D-Printing, Cancer Immunotherapy and Robotic Surgery gave a glimpse of a future that is here to stay. To be a surgeon means being at par with peers in surgical skills and knowledge. Aptitude for research is something I learnt at this conference. Despite abundant talent in Indian students, we often find ourselves in under-resourced facilities and there should be more funding to encourage research in medical school.
With this splendid experience etched in memory, I look forward to my next ACS Congress!

"The only source of knowledge is experience".

-Albert Einstein

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**Figure 1:** Registration area, Washington convention center.

**Figure 2:** Convocation ceremony.

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Figure 3: Dr. Kathryn Anderson, icons in surgery.

Figure 4: Last day of the conference.

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Authors Contribution Statement

The author has conceptualized, investigated, visualized and written the original draft as well as reviewed and edited the final version of the conference report.

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