




“They Surge-on...The Journey of an Early Career Plastic Surgeon in India as I see it”

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Abstract

The journey to becoming a plastic surgeon is a long one. Most nonsurgeons are unaware of the actual scope of plastic surgery and the spectrum of surgeries done by plastic surgeons. The constant look-out for “cutting chances” from early in the career can be quite exhausting and may take a toll on the professional relationships as well as personal lives of plastic surgeons. Many a time in the wake of striving for operative opportunities, research may take a back seat. Being an endocrinologist, who has witnessed closely, the life of a young lady plastic surgeon I have come to understand that the grind and struggle for development of skills in microsurgical techniques can be overwhelming. To prevent professional burnout, encouragement and guidance from mentors as well as setting priorities may go a long way.

Keywords

- ▶ plastic surgeon
- ▶ woman surgeon
- ▶ early career surgeon
- ▶ burn out in surgeons

Plastic surgeons are basically cosmetic surgeons in the public eye, not that nonsurgeons in the medical profession think of them differently. Most physicians are probably oblivious of the range of operative work plastic surgeons do! Given this, I have been fortunate to have witnessed closely, the journey of making of a young woman plastic surgeon in India and to say it is a roller coaster ride would be an understatement. After completing her postgraduation in general surgery, the aspiring plastic surgeon pored over her copy of “Grabb and Smith” for hours in the library in the hope of getting through the super specialty entrance exams. She secured a seat in one of the top colleges in India and plunged into her dream course. Nothing there was a cake walk. As the ecstasy of finally making it to the super specialty course faded, the gloom of the competition loomed above. Night duties and ward work adding to the huge list of surgeries seemed overwhelming while the endless struggle to “grab” operative chances seemed exhausting. As Dr. Alma Dea Morani, the first woman to join the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, recalls, during her plastic surgery training in the

1940s, she was allowed to scrub or assist in cases only once a week unlike her male colleagues who operated daily.¹ Once I learnt about this, the perpetual thirst, anxiety, and obsession about an opportunity for hands-on training that I observed in early career plastic surgeons was not surprising. The hands-on experience often comprised of 8-to-10-hour surgeries and if things did not go very well, followed a few hours later by laborious re-explorations! The social, professional, and personal demands during the early career of an ambitious plastic surgeon may enhance the risk of professional burnout that needs to be countered by setting priorities.² In the constant struggle to get “chances” to scrub for cases, one may become exhausted and lose sight of advancement in the field of research. Many brilliant minds and excellent authors put away scientific writing in the wake of prioritizing hands-on training. This aspect of medical training, where it becomes an all-or-none phenomenon, to be able to scrub for one particular case, may be less familiar to nonsurgeons. As a physician it has taken me a career’s time to understand this and how relieved I am, each time I tell myself I do not have to grab a chance to

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sneak into the operating theatre! Empathy on the part of colleagues to share operative chances among themselves may help support each other and may go a long way in strengthening professional relationships. According to a recent systematic review, risk factors for depression among surgeons included younger age, female gender, and burnout.³ The price these surgeons end up paying in order to accomplish what seems to be an ideal surgical training will probably be too high in terms of their health and family life! Hence, it is crucial for early career plastic surgeons to set priorities for professional advancement as well as recognize early signs of burnout and counter it. They need to surge on!

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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