Expanding surgical skills and knowledge after training: Lifelong learning puts patients first

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After surgical training, graduates enter an exciting transition period, full of new experiences that may be simultaneously incredibly rewarding yet likely fraught with moments of anxiety, apprehension, and self-doubt. It is expected that surgical trainees will require a period of adjustment during this transition¹; however, guidance regarding the best means to navigate this critical period of one's career is lacking. In his Young Surgeon's Note in this issue of the *Journal*, Dr Arndt² provides practical advice regarding this transition, focusing specifically on strategies to continue the learning process outside the framework of a formal training program.

As stated by Arndt² in a blanket fashion, "every new attending will face an operation with which he or she is uncomfortable," regardless of the duration of quality of the training completed. Although it is widely recognized that the learning curves during residency training are steep, there must also be recognition of the additional period of confidence-building during the transition to practice.³ In this report, detailed recommendations are given for ways in which one might continue to expand both technical skills and medical knowledge as an early-career surgeon. Arndt² explains that the young thoracic surgeon has access to a number of established support systems, allowing ongoing maturation and success. The suggestions that he shares are practical, appropriate, and widely applicable.

Excellent recommendations are provided for ways to continue to learn new skill sets, including seeking on-the-job learning from colleagues, as well as enrolling in specialty postgraduate courses. Arndt² highlights ways in which the early-career surgeon may benefit from the expertise of his or her partners, former mentors, and experts in the field. Further, a number of strategies are described for how the early-career surgeon might continue to expand his or her knowledge base, particularly in the continuously advancing field in which we practice.

Beyond the obvious practical advice given, however, this piece offers additional hidden gems of wisdom just below

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Central Message

Maturity and humility are critical components of professional development, enabling early-career thoracic surgeons to prioritize patient safety over self-reliance during their transition to practice.

See Article page 377.

the surface. Resonating throughout the article are very important undertones of humility and maturity. Arndt² encourages new graduates to acknowledge their limitations, very appropriately recognizing that, first and foremost, we must consider what is best for the *patient*. Making a smooth transition is important not only for new surgeon success but also for patient safety.¹

Arndt² advises readers that "it is incredibly important to realize that no one was an expert at every aspect of thoracic surgery upon completing training." He goes on to explain that asking for help should be viewed in a positive light, indicating maturity in recognizing the need for continued learning, rather than as a deficiency or weakness.

As we consider key components of professionalism, several important characteristics shine through in this article. Humility, self-awareness, concern for patient safety, commitment to lifelong learning, and honesty are all recognized as critical to the development and maintenance of physician professionalism.⁴ In this article, Dr Arndt² describes ways to strengthen specific skills as a general thoracic surgeon, such as expertise

with navigational bronchoscopy or comfort with complex cases. Wisely, however, he acknowledges an even more valuable set of strengths: the ability to understand one's limitations and a commitment to continued learning. Moreover, this article projects an attitude that allows young surgeons to contemplate their own success as a component of a much greater, overarching goal: *putting the patient first*.

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