



My MD-to-Be

YEAR 3, WEEK 17: STARTING THE SURGICAL CLERKSHIP

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This week, Derek begins his surgical clerkship.

WHAT IS THE SURGICAL CLERKSHIP?

The surgical clerkship is a two-month core rotation required of all clinical medical students. Students are assigned to a general surgery service for one month and to a surgical subspecialty (such as trauma surgery, vascular surgery, or breast surgery) for the other month. During this clerkship, students help out in the operating room during surgical procedures, while also becoming proficient in the care of patients who are awaiting surgery or have just completed it, managing problems such as infections and surgical complications.

Exhausting and at times exhilarating, the surgical clerkship asks a great deal of medical students. Work often begins as early as 5am, and the hours are longer during this rotation than almost any other. In the course of a day on the surgical clerkship, a student may interview and examine multiple patients in the morning, attend team meetings ("rounds") to discuss patients, and assist in surgery while the surgeon quizzes the student about the procedure. Students work in shifts, which can be as long as 24-30 hours when the student is [on call](#).

HOW DO STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THE SURGICAL CLERKSHIP?

The surgical clerkship is physically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding, and many students enter it with at least some apprehension. Being part of a surgical team is psychologically demanding, requiring physicians to relate to patients in very different ways throughout the day. During surgery, physicians must consider patients impersonally, in order to cut into them when they are unconscious; physicians also interact with the patients and their families on a very personal level, often while patients and family members experience strong emotions like anxiety, sadness, or relief.

The social experience of being a member of different surgical teams can also be challenging. Surgical teams, made up of surgeons, nurses, and technicians ("techs") are close-knit, having worked together for years. Some surgeons and surgical teams will be warm, welcoming, and make every effort to include students in the procedure and teach as they work; others may be brusque and to-the-point, quizzing students constantly and sometimes harshly.

As a result of the intense demands of the surgical clerkship, many students feel overwhelmed at times. Students witness and participate in scenes that most people would consider traumatizing, have frequent difficult interactions with surgical teams, with patients and with patient families - all while experiencing exhaustion and lack of control over their own schedule. However students respond, surgical clerkship is often a very challenging milestone in the course of medical training.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT DEREK DURING THE SURGICAL CLERKSHIP?

- If you speak with Derek before the start of the surgical clerkship, ask him about his hopes and fears. Listen while he is talking and accept his concerns as legitimate.
- Derek will probably be exhausted during much of this clerkship, due to the incredible physical and emotional strain he will experience. Let him know, in advance, that you understand if he won't be in frequent contact with you, so he has one less thing to worry about.
- Derek may become emotionally reactive in ways that seem strange to you, as a result of witnessing difficult sights and having to function professionally through them. At home, Derek may appear unfeeling and uncaring about problems that arise, or he may have strong emotional reactions to seemingly minor things, such as a TV show. Be gentle and patient with Derek, and also with yourself. Do not take his reactions personally.
- Expect Derek to have little control over his schedule. He may miss a phone call, a meal, a date, or a flight. He can neither anticipate nor control when he will be able to leave the hospital. Again, help him worry about you less by telling him that you understand if he needs to miss something you scheduled together.
- Live your own life. Do not wait for Derek in order to do fun or important things. If you set a dinner date with friends and Derek calls at the last minute to say he has to stay at the hospital for 3 more hours, go have dinner with your friends. Continue to take care of yourself—physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually—so you do not become depleted and resentful.
- Help Derek take care of herself during these stressful times, by giving him things you know he enjoys that do not require a major time investment on his part. A home-cooked meal, cookies, a massage (by you or as a gift card) are all good ways to show how much you respect and care for Derek.

EXTRA CREDIT

If you would like to read about one student's experience, here is a student blog post that we found especially thoughtful:

- [Clerkship Experiences: Surgery \(My Life In Med School\)](#)