How to succeed in dermatologic surgery

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Abstract

This article explores the many facets of success within dermatologic surgery. We incorporate advice from both dermatologists and dermatologic surgeons to provide overall advice and strategies for success. In addition, we discuss specific tips for matching and career development.

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Introduction

The definition of success is in the eye of the beholder. In Latin, “successus” translates to “an advance, succession, or a happy outcome.” In terms of achieving professional success, we hope to pull from many of the living “grandes dames” of dermatology to provide insights on how best to succeed in dermatologic surgery. Wilma Bergfeld MD, the founder of the Women’s Dermatologic Society (WDS) and first female president of the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), states that her mantra is “passion, preparation-preparation, participation, patience, resilience, and vision.” This article expands on these themes and beyond as we explore the many facets of success in dermatologic surgery.

Finding your passion and niche

To be successful in dermatologic surgery, finding something you are passionate about is imperative. At the end of the day, we spend more waking hours at our jobs than we do at home. In medicine, we all have worked too hard for too long not to find something to be passionate about at work. Dr. Amy Paller, Chair of the Department of Dermatology at Northwestern and the former president of the WDS, states: “We as dermatologists have an unparalleled opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our community. We see large numbers of patients with a wide variety of disorders, which gives us great diversity in directions for research and care, and also great challenges. The key word for me is to ENGAGE. No matter if one is a fabulous clinician, a scientist, or a potential leader in the community, look for challenges and seize them using whatever skill you have. Passion, commitment, and relationships are what make our lives so meaningful.”

With passion and commitment comes meaning in one’s work, and when working on something you are passionate about, an expertise or niche develops. Dr. Boni Elewski, the past president of the AAD and chair at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, shares that it is never too soon to begin looking for a niche and states: “Residents need to get a gig so when residency finishes, they are an expert in an area such as psoriasis, nail diseases, hair, etc. This expertise will also open doors for speaking at the AAD.” You do not have to know your niche immediately upon graduating, but residency is a good time to try out many different areas of dermatology. In addition, residents, fellows, and young attending physicians have the opportunity to find multiple mentors to help guide their career. Formal mentorship programs are offered through the AAD, the American Society of Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS), the American Professors of Dermatology, and the WDS. Informal mentorships can happen in multiple settings: through training programs or by approaching a specialist at a local, regional, or national meeting. E-mail is often a good means to approach a potential mentor who may not live in your local area. Do not be discouraged if you do not hear back from someone because it is never personal and likely a sign that that potential mentor may not have the bandwidth for a meaningful mentoring relationship at that time.

Most individuals have one major clinical or research niche, but it is not unusual to have multiple areas of expertise or for those areas to change over time. Fret not if you find that you are no longer interested in a particular area because it is never too late to develop a new area of interest. In fact, being a lifelong learner keeps you engaged and interested throughout your career and helps advance our field.

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Pearl Grimes MD, the current president of the WDS, states: “ALL of us [dermatologists] are major stakeholders in advancing the future of our specialty. Our great dreams can become novel visions. Our visions become the new realities. We move forward in discovering seminal therapies and changing lives. Each of us possesses unique skills/talents in building the magnificent future for dermatology.”

Getting involved

It is never too early to get involved in local, regional, and national organizations to develop your career in dermatologic surgery. On the local and regional level, most major metropolitan areas or states have a dermatologic society with meetings and events where you can hear great lectures and get to know dermatologic surgeons. This is often a good way to setup opportunities to shadow a physician, visit a practice, or start a research or community outreach project.

With regard to getting involved, Dr. Suzanne Connolly recommends to “stay tuned in, give lectures, be active in organizations, and to accept assignments.” There are several ways to get involved in national societies with dermatologic surgery. As a medical student, the most common annual meeting to attend would be the AAD. If you are working on a research or clinical project, you may have the opportunity to present, which would be beneficial for your residency application. During your residency, get to know your surgical director early on and express your interest in dermatologic surgery. Find opportunities to learn more about dermatologic surgery. Although there is currently a wide range of surgical and cosmetic training in residency programs, there are several national conferences to get additional didactic and hands-on training such as annual meetings (ASDS, American College of Mohs Surgery, American College of Phlebology, Cosmetic Surgery Forum, and American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery), elective rotations, and special training sessions such as the ASDS resident cosmetic symposium or live courses.

As a young attending physician, find things you are passionate about and dive in. According to Dr. Antoinette Hood, the former executive director of the American Board of Dermatology: “A wise man [her husband, Evan Farmer] once told me that 1) if I wanted to have my voice heard, I needed to have a seat at the table, and 2) if I wanted to be involved and someone offered me a job, the correct answer was ‘yes.’” As you are building your reputation, taking any opportunity to get involved is important, and this can be through service events such as skin cancer screenings, local or regional lecturing opportunities, or introducing yourself to other dermatologists in your community.

Matching into fellowship

Currently, there are two main avenues to receive advanced fellowship training in dermatologic surgery: The ACGME Micrographic Surgery and Dermatologic Oncology fellowship and the ASDS Cosmetic Dermatologic Surgery Fellowship. Both are 1-year fellowships, typically completed at a single institution, and provide advanced training in dermatologic surgery. Fellowships are typically matched positions through the San Francisco Match. A fellowship is somewhat different from a residency and structured like an apprenticeship where you work with a smaller number of attending physicians. You typically are the only trainee, which allows for a significant amount of learning.

To prepare yourself for a fellowship application, the identification of mentors and working closely with residency program and surgical directors to alert them of your interest is important. Many applicants get to know specific programs better through away rotations, but not all fellowship programs allow rotations for potential applicants. For a successful application, you need strong letters of support from your surgical director and typically two additional faculty members from your residency program or away rotations. In addition, past research in your area of interest and presentations of a poster or oral presentation at a national meeting are beneficial. Finally, the interview itself plays a major role in the decision on the right fit for any given program.

Most applicants apply to start fellowships immediately after completion of their residency, but returning for advanced training after being in practice for several years is not unusual. To match successfully into a fellowship after an absence from the traditional training environment, identifying mentors and having a key advocate is important to help get your application noticed and reviewed. On-site visits or mini-rotations with fellowships of particular interest may also be helpful. Of note, work with your malpractice carrier to understand your coverage, particularly if the visit is out of state.

If at first you do not succeed...

The histories of so many of our successful leaders are seeded with stories of challenges and setbacks with the need for perpetual persistence. Dr. Jean Carruthers, the inventor of Botox (onabotulinumtoxin A) stated that when she gave her first talk at ASDS about the use of neurotoxins, many told her that it was a crazy idea that would go nowhere. As we all know, Botox has become a household name and Botox injections are the number one cosmetic procedure performed worldwide. The same is true of setting big goals and dreams for your career in dermatologic surgery. If something is truly important to you, do not be deterred by what appears to be an initial failure. Take the opportunity to stop, think about the potential reasons that your idea or proposal may have failed, and find a way to learn from the failure and be stronger for the next round. As Winston Churchill stated: “Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.”

The right job

No fear of failure is also relevant to find the right job. Data show that the majority of physicians will not stay at their first job for longer than 2 to 3 years. Sometimes identifying the aspects of a job that are important to you takes time. Unfortunately, residency and fellowship demands leave little time for job exploration, but starting out in a position that is right for you will set the tone for the next 3 to 4 decades of your career. Although there are literally dozens of aspects of a job that can impact your overall happiness and success, many agree that having great colleagues and friends at work is key. According to Dr. Jean Carruthers, “Always surround yourself with great people who are positive and hardworking like yourself.” Having a positive, supportive work environment goes a long way toward having a satisfying career in dermatologic surgery.

Dr. Barbara Gilchrist, the editor of the Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2012–2017), former chair at Boston University, and elected member of the National Academy of Medicine, states that to succeed, one must “first have a plan, preferably written, for the next 1, 5, and 10 years. It can change, but you need one. Second, build a network. Third, develop an expertise. Fourth, follow through and take credit for what you do. And finally, don’t give up.”

One of the first major decisions when making a plan for your career in dermatologic surgery is the type of practice environment in which you would like to practice. Many personal and professional factors go into making this decision. Knowing yourself and the things that are most important to you and your family is imperative. Identify geographic or other restrictions, and while the temptation of a generous salary is great, look deeply into opportunities for growth, leadership, and advancement. Look at your support network and the availability of mentors. In addition, negotiating the subtleties of a contract is extremely important up front, particularly in private and group-practice environments. However, as a very wise mentor once
stated, “It’s not necessarily the deal you are making, but with whom you are shaking hands.” Ultimately, you need to feel good about who you work for, and at the end of the day, you have to make a decision and go for it! There is no such thing as a perfect job. Try to learn as much as you can from less optimal experiences (what not to do) as you do from phenomenal, supportive job environments.

Building your reputation

The Hippocratic Oath, which is taken by all physicians and states “first do no harm,” is paramount. According to Dr. Suzanne Connolly, the former WDS president, patient care is “the crown of being a dermatologist.” Your first priority must always be your patients and providing the best care each and every day. Dr. Madeline Duvic, professor of internal medicine and deputy chairman of the Department of Dermatology at the University of Texas MD Anderson, says that we must “listen to patients, touch their skin, do a complete evaluation and skin exam. Be a doctor – take care of the body and soul.”

This is also the best way to build your local and regional reputation in the community. By taking good care of patients, your reputation will spread by word of mouth. In addition, in this day and age, your reputation—good or bad—can spread like wildfire via online review sites, and monitoring your online reputation, whether yourself or your staff, is important. In dermatologic surgery, honing your surgical skills and aiming for the best possible outcomes for each and every one of your patients is also important. By taking good care of patients and providing optimal procedural outcomes, your clinical reputation will continue to grow.

Part of building your professional reputation is also being reliable. Saying yes, especially early in your career, is important. Saying no can be equally if not more important if you are unable to follow through with your commitment. You are only as good as your word, and your ability to deliver on promises made in a professional environment is important.

Having it all

There is no such thing as having it all, or at least not at the same time. However, we can all strive to attain a life that is challenging, rewarding, and balanced. According to Dr. Susan Weinkle, the past president of WDS and ASDS, “Life is a journey, not a race. Work-life balance is mandatory for success. I knew in order to enjoy raising my children while working full-time, I needed help... a cook!” Whether in the form of hired help at home or setting aside time for vacations and hobbies, allocating time for all other aspects of life is imperative.

In addition, physician burnout is on the rise. At any given time, one in three physicians is estimated to experience burnout. We are not taught work-life balance skills in the typical medical school or residency curriculum. In fact, during training, we often learn to ignore our personal, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in order to succeed. Finding a balance between work and life that both you and your family are happy with will allow for long-term satisfaction in both arenas.

Paying it forward

According to Dr. June Robinson, the editor of JAMA Dermatology and former president of ASDS and the American Cancer Society, “It is fine to be the first, but it would be terrible to be the last woman in a job. I was acutely aware of the negative consequences if I did a poor job.” Dr. Robinson is a pioneer in the field of dermatologic surgery and highlights that when given an opportunity, we must embrace it and never take it for granted. Reaching out and paying it forward to the next generation of budding dermatologic surgeons is extremely important. Not a single one of us got to where we are now without the help of countless individuals along the way. Whether formally teaching in a medical school or residency environment, volunteering with national organizations, or helping a local student find their passion in medicine, giving back is so important. According to Dr. Mary Maloney, chair at the University of Massachusetts and the past president of WDS, mentoring is paramount, and “it is wonderful to see people succeed and actually take the specialty to far higher levels than I ever could.”

Summing it all up

Dr. Suzanne Olbricht, president of the AAD, sums it all up by saying that to be successful “we need to look to the future and adapt so that we stay relevant in the changing world, and can continue to offer excellent care to our patients.” Ultimately, according to Dr. Lynn Drake, former president of AAD and WDS, this comes down to “having the courage to believe in yourself. Leadership often involves making difficult choices, but stand up for what you think is right. P. S. – lead, don’t follow.”