Letter from Field

Health systems strengthening: a call from the future of the operating room

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Once coined the *neglected stepchild of global health*, surgical care has become an integral part of healthcare.¹ Five billion people worldwide lack access to safe, timely, and affordable surgery, obstetrics, and anesthesia, causing over 18 million preventable deaths each year.² To systematically address infrastructural and workforce shortages, and increase the accessibility of safe surgical care, National Surgical, Obstetric, and Anesthesia Plans (NSOAPs) are being developed around the world.³ As strategic plans embedded within countries' national health plans, NSOAPs allow for comprehensive health system strengthening across workforce, infrastructure, service delivery, financing, information management, and governance.⁴

At the core of developing NSOAPs is a multi-stakeholder dialogue from start to end, ensuring representative, effective, and necessary implementation efforts downstream. To date, however, the inclusion of a student voice—the future health workforce—has been absent in NSOAP processes. Nevertheless, the global surgery community has already embraced the importance of trainee involvement in global surgery advocacy and research. InciSioN, the International Student Surgical Network, represents thousands of these proactive medical students, residents and young physicians around the world.⁵ Notably, InciSioN empowers students in low- and middle-income countries to take up leadership roles nationally and internationally, and engage in high-level meetings and policy dialogues.⁵

Youth input contributed significantly to the field of surgery. The World Bank World Development Indicators surgical data collection 2016 was spearheaded by students. More recently, international high-level meetings have placed increasing emphasis on youth engagement, highlighting the need for student participation. InciSioN hosts one of the largest and most diverse global surgery conferences annually, having recently convened 300 students from 17 African countries in Rwanda, after previous events in Morocco and Belgium. Furthermore, InciSioN works closely with professional bodies, including as Permanent Council member in the Global Alliance for Surgical, Obstetric, Trauma, and Anesthesia Care (G4 Alliance), providing a strong youth voice in major stakeholder discussions in the field of global surgery.

Trainees are aware of problems their communities face, particularly in underserved areas where they actively participate in providing care for their community. They are vocal and eager to learn, and can be valuable assets to any NSOAP process by:

1. Providing input on proposed goals and activities set forth by the respective NSOAPs;
2. Supporting baseline country assessments and data collections;

3. Ensuring sustainable and long-term implementation efforts as future surgical, obstetric, and anesthesia providers and policymakers.

On the contrary, lack of upstream engagement can impede future efforts by inconsistencies between set goals and perceived reality across generations. Similarly, lack of early education of trainees on the targeted interventions may limit effective implementation.

Students can and should be more than a mere helping hand. As the future of the operating room, their early inclusion will prove vital to maximize the efficiency and efficacy of NSOAPs worldwide. Importantly, they represent not only the future health workforce, but will also be most affected by the implementation of NSOAPs. The importance of a youth and student voice cannot be understated: we therefore ask NSOAP Steering Committees to engage with student bodies locally to ensure holistic and inclusive planning.

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