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The Australasian Students' Surgical Association: organizational growth amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Student surgical societies play an important role in complementing university medical curricula in the delivery of surgical education, fostering interest in surgery and facilitating networking and career opportunities.¹ The Australasian Students' Surgical Association (ASSA) was established in 2015 as a not-for-profit student-run organization aiming to unite the 26 student surgical societies across Australia and New Zealand.² Through in-person conferences, Sydney-based leadership seminars and surgical workshops, the ASSA has successfully achieved its vision to support surgical education, foster student interest in surgery, and create a culture of collaboration amongst surgical societies. As the COVID-19 pandemic presented a variety of unforeseen challenges to the medical profession, student organizations across the world were required to adapt to the content and delivery of activities.³ The pandemic posed significant challenges for the ASSA to continue promoting a pre-vocational interest in surgery for Australian and New Zealand medical students and required innovative strategies to continue delivering educational opportunities. This need to adopt alternative approaches provided an opportunity for innovation and embracing technology to overcome COVID-19 related restrictions to continue achieving the goals for ASSA.

Progress

Across 2020 and 2021, ASSA has seen several disruptions to events and initiatives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the ASSA approached these disruptions as an opportunity for technological innovation, expansion of portfolio and growth of research.

The Australasian Student Surgical Conference (ASSC) is the flagship student conference held annually by the ASSA team. Prior to the pandemic, the ASSC was an in-person event, typically attended by 400 students in 2019. For the past 2 years, the ASSC has been held online, with an expanded attendance of over 1000 medical students registering for the event. Moreover, the virtual conference was free-of-charge, which improved accessibility for students of various socioeconomic backgrounds or those who may be required to travel long distances to attend in-person events. This promoted greater inclusiveness of the New Zealand based students. Due to the success of the virtual ASSC, subsequent conferences

will be offered in "hybrid form", to continue promoting accessibility and increasing attendance.

Pre-COVID, the ASSA leadership seminar was restricted to the 26 surgical society presidents and vice presidents. Keynote and breakout sessions were solely focussed on leadership within their surgical society. Due to travel restrictions in 2021, the leadership seminar was run virtually for the first time. The event was made accessible to all medical students and the event aims were widened to include soft skills, problem solving and critical thinking, and career mentoring sessions.

Despite the pandemic, the ASSA was able to continue with planned expansion, with a focus on mentorship and promoting diversity within surgery. In 2021, the Mentoring Australasian Surgical Students (MASS) program was launched, with the support of the Section of Academic Surgery of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. This included 85 students who were matched with 72 junior doctors, registrars, and surgeons allowing students for monthly sessions to gain insight into a surgical career, network, and develop a mentor-mentee relationship. While the mentoring program was initially proposed with an in-person meet and greet session, the pandemic required utilization of online meeting platforms. This promoted flexible discussions for students and mentors that were personalized to their specific needs and provided networking opportunities beyond the borders of their state of residence. Feedback was sought from students and mentors. Students felt that they were able to learn more about work life balance, SET training requirements and how to best make use of their surgical rotations. Mentors mirrored the sentiment of students, and most expressed a desire to mentor again in the future, either with MASS or local surgical societies.

Another example of the expanded portfolio during the pandemic which received positive feedback was the inaugural EMPoWER in Surgery (Empowering and Motivating Pre-SET Women in Surgery) event as the first interstate collaboration between the Australian National University surgical society and the Adelaide University surgical society. The cancellations of local surgical society in-person workshops fostered a greater need for collaboration, bringing students together to address gender disparities.

Finally, the pandemic provided the opportunity for research collaboration, such as through the sub-organization, Trials and Audits in Surgery by Medical Students in Australia and New Zealand (TASMAN) Collaborative. The first Australasian-born student-led collaborative study will run in 2022 as a prospective multi-center

study to evaluate Opioid Prescription and Usage After Surgery (OPERAS).

Future directions

Reflecting on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, ASSA will continue to grow and find innovative ways to inspire future surgeons, including continuing technology use for events, creating local ASSA hubs and improving online education services for students. In 2022, the ASSC in Brisbane will be conducted using a hybrid format. Feedback from participants will be sought to evaluate this new mode of delivery of the conference to inform future events. As the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant travel restrictions, the ASSA is aiming to create state hubs and launch the New Zealand Chapter of ASSA. This will facilitate “in-person” surgical skills workshops to be conducted locally, should travel restrictions be encountered again within this or future pandemics. Finally, the ASSA is working to launch the Australasian Students’ Surgical Education Tools (ASSETs) resource, to provide students online educational material including flashcards, surgical snapshots, and multiple choice questions to enhance their learning.

Conclusion

The ASSA used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to develop technological strategies for events and education, expand portfolios and promote research collaboration. These contingency initiatives may be adopted by other student-run interest groups to continue supporting medical students in Australia and across the world in the future.

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