Retired Plastic Surgeons as Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sammy Al-Benna¹

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There are an estimated 46,300 plastic surgeons worldwide [1]. More than one-third of all physicians are 65 or older [2]. At this very moment, there may be 15,000 retired plastic surgeons around the world. Our life's work and our identity as plastic surgeons deeply motivates our desire to help during this worldwide pandemic, yet we recognize that we are now considered a high-risk population [3–6]. It is during this time of wanting to contribute that inspired me to share this perspective [3–6].

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, medical schools and universities have quickly switched the entire medical undergraduate and postgraduate surgical curriculums to online formats that include content in the basic sciences and health systems sciences [3, 4]. This undergraduate and postgraduate-oriented educational paradigm change requires online teaching and mentoring for medical students and surgical trainees, together with the creation of educational materials [3, 4]. This process has inundated many surgical educators who have synchronous academic and clinical demands.

Retired plastic surgeons constitute a valuable and frequently underutilized resource for surgical training

programs. Heads of Divisions of Plastic Surgery should explore opportunities to integrate retired surgical colleagues into their educational programs. Retired plastic surgeons, within their skills and knowledge, can provide online teaching, education materials and mentoring for medical students and plastic surgical trainees.

Retired plastic surgeons have extensive clinical experience, pattern-recognition skills, and reasoning abilities and can therefore share the wisdom and lessons learned during their careers in surgery with younger colleagues [7, 8]. In particular, over the course of their careers, retired plastic surgeons have developed the emotional intelligence that enables them to teach trainees valuable strategies for COVID-19 stress by remaining composed [7, 8]. With encouragement, these retired plastic surgeons can support a variety of virtual educational activities including multi-disciplinary team oncology meeting, morbidity and mortality conferences, online simulation training, mock oral examinations, problem-based learning sessions for surgery residents and medical students and research projects.

Although retired plastic surgeons may not be able to participate clinically during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are a phenomenal resource for education. There is a universal need to engage our retired plastic surgeons. The COVID-19 pandemic may represent a unique opportunity for enduring transformation in surgical training, and incorporation of retired surgeons as voluntary faculty members in the plastic surgery department will benefit medical students, trainee surgeons, specialists, faculty, and retired surgeons in a similar way. The COVID-19 pandemic has made us recognize how we are much more alike than we are different, and this is definitely true in surgery and surgical education [9].

✉ Sammy Al-Benna
albenna@sun.ac.za

¹ Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University and Tygerberg Academic Hospital, Francie van Zijl Drive, Tygerberg, PO Box 241, Cape Town 8000, South Africa

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