

# Australasian Students' Surgical Association: Leadership, Perseverance and Progress through SARS-CoV-2

## Introduction

The Australasian Students' Surgical Association (ASSA) is a not-for-profit, student-run organization supporting the 26 student surgical societies across Australia and New Zealand. It fosters interest in surgery through positive surgical experiences, insight into surgical careers and by developing technical and non-technical skills. Further background about the history and activities of ASSA are detailed elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

The year 2020 has seen many societal challenges, notably the COVID-19 crisis, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020.<sup>2</sup> There have been significant downstream ramifications for medical students as learning opportunities in the operating theatre, at the bedside and in formal institutional settings become limited.<sup>3</sup> In addition, travel restrictions and social distancing recommendations have led to the cancellation or postponement of many face-to-face courses and conferences.<sup>3</sup> ASSA has responded to these changes to provide surgically inclined students with opportunities to learn about surgery, in turn serving as models of organizational adaptability in rapidly evolving times.

## Progress

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred the ASSA committee and student surgical societies to realize new ways of delivering valuable opportunities to surgically inclined students and ensuring the longevity of their organizations.

In 2020, ASSA developed a policy base and authored specific publications in order to establish itself as a legitimate representative body.<sup>4,5</sup> Policy development is facilitated through an open call-out system and ratified by all student surgical societies. The current policy base includes global surgery and rural surgery. Furthermore, a Gender Equity guide was created to provide background and practical ways for student groups to improve inclusiveness within surgery.<sup>5</sup> ASSA also sought to reduce global inequities in the provision of safe and equitable surgical care, strengthening its affiliation with the International Student Surgical Network and the International Association of Student Surgical Societies, developing local working groups and organizing specific events and resources introducing the concept of global surgery to students. These initiatives endeavour to encourage professional development and a sense of community for students in a time of social displacement.

ASSA also facilitated the growth of the Trials and Audit in Surgery for Medical Students in Australia and New Zealand collaborative. Knowledge of research principles is a prerequisite to

becoming a well-rounded surgeon, as reflected in the requirements for entry into surgical training programmes.<sup>6</sup> Research collaboratives are demonstrating the power of amplifying individual efforts to answer clinical questions whilst simultaneously reducing research waste. ASSA recognizes the importance of preparing students for collaborative research. The Trials and Audit in Surgery for Medical Students in Australia and New Zealand aims to educate on the foundations of collaborative clinical audit and research, and provide opportunities to participate in projects including the CHOLECOVID and COVIDSurg.<sup>7</sup>

COVID-imposed travel restrictions encouraged a paradigm shift in public engagement towards virtual delivery. As a binational organization, ASSA inherently faces the challenge of balancing logistical practicalities with equity of opportunity. The Australasian Students' Surgical Conference transitioned online in 2020, drawing an unprecedented 1600 attendees with novel methods of delivering networking and hands-on activities from home. An open-access webinar series, Value in Virtual Approaches, featured international speakers, with each session supporting a local charity relevant to the session's theme. Moreover, ASSA developed a membership with exclusive access to creative competition voting, educational content and a biannual newsletter.<sup>8</sup> Numerous surgical societies demonstrated creativity and resourcefulness through the inclusion of virtual seminars from surgeons, online workshops and podcasts. Not only do virtual approaches enable social distancing, they may also serve as an enduring model of cost-effectiveness, accessibility and eco-sustainability.

The widespread socioeconomic instability caused by COVID-19 prompted ASSA to establish its inaugural Board of Directors to provide accountability and continuity. The board was established following extensive research and consultation, and primarily consists of ASSA alumni with advisory members from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

## Future Directions

While the course of COVID-19 cannot be predicted, the need for constant adaptation is certain. Changes that ASSA will implement, regardless of local restrictions, are increased collaboration and use of virtual formats. Although there will be some reversion to pre-COVID arrangements where local restrictions allow, the provision of alternative or hybrid modes will remain for the foreseeable future.

To maximize opportunities for students, ASSA and local societies must work in synchrony. In addition to current collaborations,

the focus in future years includes involving societies more intimately through regular discourse and establishing infrastructure to share resources binationally, including local online events, in-person event ideas, templates and sponsors. This will embed prior learning as a springboard for stronger performance by individual surgical societies.

Barriers posed by geographic distance have been a constant challenge for the binational ASSA, exacerbated by COVID-19. However, the social distancing and travel restrictions forced by COVID-19 have catalysed the implementation of online delivery modules. Medical education and medical conference organizations have utilized virtual and hybrid delivery modes to mitigate the impact of social distancing enforced due to COVID-19.<sup>9,10</sup> The ASSA recommends utilizing virtual formats in concert with in-person as online connectivity has increased. ASSA and surgical societies will leverage the advantages of this online space to meaningfully provide opportunities for students, especially where this aligns with goals of access, equity and sustainability. Key policies and guides addressing global surgery and gender inequity must be enacted meaningfully, and ASSA intends to liaise with key stakeholders including tertiary education institutions, the Australian Medical Students' Association and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

Having been immersed in information technology since a young age, most current students have been afforded a sense of 'digital nativity' that makes them prime candidates to navigate the remarkable new world of online technology within medical contexts. By capitalizing on opportunities to engage in virtual processes, the ASSA has demonstrated the effectiveness of innovative processes in education, advocacy and research which may be usefully adopted by other surgical groups.


## Author Contributions

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