Notes for International Medical Graduates (IMG) planning on pursuing a career in General Surgery in the United States of America

American College of Surgeons
www.facs.org

The issues are two fold

I. IMMIGRATION
II. SURGERY TRAINING

I. IMMIGRATION: This aspect can be very difficult and often takes more time to deal with than residency training applications.

The various ways of entering US for surgical careers include:

a. US green card or citizen: This is the easiest route but very difficult to obtain! There are no restrictions on length of stay and what programs you can apply to. This is important if you have a break in your residency for any reason, the time limits of certain other visas do not apply.

b. H visa: This is a work related visa and should be the preferred non-immigrant visa that one should work towards obtaining. This is usually given for 3-year periods and can be extended once. The advantages: no “mandatory return to home” rule at the end of training and can be a route to obtaining green card. The disadvantages: hospitals are less enthusiastic to work for this visa than the J visa as it involves more work and expense to the Institution.

c. J visa: The easiest to get but the most difficult to deal with later. This visa is given based on an exchange program that exists between the US and certain countries. The advantages: mainly for the Institute and hospitals is the ease with which it is obtained and it involves less work for the Institution. The disadvantages are multiple: 1) there is a 7-year limit on the visa, 2) the visa is very specific, rigid, and not flexible, i.e. if you get it for clinical work it is hard to do research and vice versa, 3) it can be very field specific, so switching surgical specialties can be difficult, 4) you need to be able to get into a categorical program by the second year/third year otherwise you may have to leave, 5) you can apply for Fellowships that are ACGME accredited, and fellows entering “non-standard” (not ACGME accredited) can obtain J-1’s but it is a longer process requiring a letter from the appropriate board and additional review by ECFMG, 6) at the end of 7 years, one has to satisfy the obligatory “2-year return to home country rule.” Many get out of this by various ways, but it involves a lot of work and an amount of uncertainty that can make matters very difficult.

It is imperative that IMG’s address this issue carefully so that you do not end up spending a lot of time on an annual basis and also to avoid the stress of the prolonged period of uncertainty.
These websites may be of use:

http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm (Official website of the United States Citizenship and Immigration services- Information on all types of visas etc)

www.nvars.com (This is the website to use for making appointments for visa extension once in the US. The appointments are in Canada, Mexico etc and should be booked well in advance. Depending on your location in the US, you can make an appointment, but most prefer to go to Canada with the better service at smaller cities such as Ottawa, Vancouver when compared to Toronto)

www.immihelp.com (This is a website maintained by immigrants for future immigrants. It is very helpful with tips and pearls that you may not otherwise obtain from the official websites. It is very comprehensive and is a very good resource). There are several other websites that one may find on the web, which may be more relevant to IMG’s from specific countries.

II.  **SURGERY TRAINING:**

This can be broadly divided into three steps:

a. **Residency training**
   b. **Board certification in General Surgery**
   c. **Fellowship training**

a. **Residency Training:**

Residency training in General Surgery in the US consists of 5 years of clinical training from Internship to Chief Residency. Although research (1-2 years) is desirable for careers in academic surgery, the funding and positions can be difficult to obtain.

There are two ways of obtaining a position in General Surgery residency:

1) To apply along with the local candidates through the NRMP (National Residency Matching Program- http://www.nrmp.org

2) To obtain a position out of the match. General Surgery is very competitive and about 15% of positions are obtained by IMG’s are through the match. The majority of IMG’s get into the system by starting with a preliminary position. Once in the system, most of the IMG’s manage to complete the residency either at the same institution or at another.
Since there is no standard way to assimilate the IMG’s from different parts of the world with varying degrees of prior training, these are some of the suggested pathways that have worked in the past:

1) Apply through NRMP for categorical/preliminary position
2) Obtain position out of match – categorical/preliminary position
3) Come as a research fellow and then apply for a residency
4) Do additional degrees such as MPH before applying for residency
5) Do clinical fellowship first (such as Transplant, etc) and then complete 3-5 years of training (General Surgery) to become Board eligible.

b. **Board Certification:**

Once you have completed 5 years of General Surgery training in the US, you are Board eligible. The majority of the candidates now take the exam for Board certification. The initial exam consists of a written portion. After passing the written exam, you have to take the oral exam. If successful, you will obtain Board certification in General Surgery.

[www.absurgery.org](http://www.absurgery.org)

c. **Fellowship Training:**

After completing training in General Surgery, 70% of US graduates pursue specialized training. There are several fellowships available in every specialty and are of 1-3 years in duration. The positions in each field are few and very competitive. The likelihood of obtaining a fellowship depends on the field and the prevailing balance of supply and demand. The number of IMG’s applying successfully to Cardio-thoracic Surgery in the recent past has increased due to declining interest from local candidates. Conversely, few are successful in obtaining a position in Plastic Surgery or Surgical Oncology.

As your training is nearing to an end, apply for medical licensure in the state that you want to work in well in advance. Every aspect of licensing an IMG takes much longer than the local candidates and it helps to have all the certificates from your University ready.

For further information specific to UNMC General Surgery Residency:

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