



PREPARING FOR YOUR SURGICAL ROTATION: SOME ESSENTIALS!

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The first day that I walked into my surgical rotation was both an amazing and terrifying experience all at the same time. Not only was it the first day of my surgical rotation, but it was also the very first day of my very first clinical rotation in PA school! Within just an hour of checking in to the department of surgery, I had already scrubbed into my first surgical case.

My mind was feeling rather numb with nervousness when I recall being asked detailed anatomy questions about blood vessels and layers of muscles. I do not remember specifically how I answered, but I must have “passed” the test because in the next moment the surgeon had given me permission to lean in closer and put my hand on none other than the aorta! That moment of connecting all of the head knowledge with reality--to see firsthand the living, pulsating organ that I studied for so long--was unforgettable.

I was privileged to have a fellow student (who was more experienced than I) that took the time to show me the ropes at the start of my surgical rotation. However, on several occasions, there were some funny learning experiences that could not necessarily be taught. Such as the day that I figured out I could adjust my face mask without contaminating my sterile hands, simply by wiggling my jaw and mouth in a certain way! Or the day that I discovered the steps (a form of stepstool used in the operating room) could be stacked, and I could actually stand on two of them to be at the right height with the very tall surgeon I was working with.

Like my experience, walking into your first day of surgical rotations can be a scary endeavor, while at the same time absolutely thrilling and unforgettable! Of course, each surgical rotation site will be different, and each student will have a different experience as the sites, staff, and surgeons vary. However, the following are suggestions that I found most valuable in my experience with surgical rotations. It is my hope that any student can carry these tips with them to help make the experience a successful and enjoyable one!

ESSENTIALS: BEFORE SURGERY

Pack food!

Pack individually wrapped snacks that are packaged small enough to fit in a lab coat or pocket, and can be easily consumed on-the-go. Be forewarned that depending on how long the surgeries are, you may not be able to have a lunch break! Being prepared will help you to avoid a low blood-sugar crash (you do not want to be the student that faints during the surgery!).

Wear the right clothing!

Support stockings and good shoes will make a huge difference for tired feet and legs! Do not forget that you may be standing for many hours, so investing in a good pair of support stockings and shoes will definitely pay off. Also, be aware that some operating rooms may be very cold (especially cardiac), and it may serve you well to bring a warm undershirt. With that said, hospital policies vary regarding scrubs, and some do not allow you to wear shirts under them. Just be sure to check with your hospital ahead of time!

ESSENTIALS: DURING SURGERY

Introduce yourself!

Be sure that you take some time to meet the entire team that you will be working with. This includes, but is not



limited to the surgeon, resident, physician assistant, nursing first assistant, circulating nurse, scrub nurse or technician, anesthesiologist, nurse anesthetist . . . you get the idea! Taking the initiative to introduce yourself makes a statement, as it is both professional and shows respect for the surgical team. While you are introducing yourself, be clear on your role and where you will be standing during the surgical case. In some settings you will also be able to meet the patient.

Make friends with the nurses!

In addition to introducing yourself, take some time to make friends with the nurses! They are typically the ones that are making sure everything runs smoothly in the operating room and will be your best friend when it comes to feeling comfortable in the environment. If you have not already learned, ask them how to gown and glove yourself. You can also offer to help insert urinary catheters or help position the patient for surgery. Look for opportunities for be helpful!

Know your role!

Each surgeon has a different comfort level with students, and you should find out what your role will be in the surgery. Ask ahead of time where you are to stand (and grab a step if you need one). As a general rule, do not touch anything in blue unless instructed to do so when you are fully gowned and gloved. And, always ask when in doubt! Initially, your job will most likely be to hold retractors or cut surgical ties or sutures. As an additional tip, a surgical PA once told me “No scary cutting!” This means having a steady hand on your instrument and always using the other hand to stabilize while cutting. Ask a surgeon or surgical PA to teach you how to cut properly so you can be ready to cut when asked!

Find and put on your gear!

Take the time to ask where the “clean holding” area is to find your surgical gown and gloves. The clean holding areas are typically where sterile packaged items are held, including gowns and gloves. Some surgeons prefer that you double glove, so be sure to find this information out beforehand and figure out which sizes work best for you; some suggest going a half size up for the underglove, while others suggest using two pairs of the same size. Other essential items include hair and shoe covers, gown, face mask, and eye protection.

ESSENTIALS: AFTER SURGERY

Review what you learned!

If you are like me, there are times that I become tongue-tied when a surgeon asks, “do you have any questions?” Sometimes what I have just witnessed is so amazing that I need time to process everything that I have seen. Often questions will come after you have had time to process, so I encourage you to write down your thoughts when they come to mind and always keep a list of your questions handy. And, take time to review anything you did not cover in your preparatory studies! This reinforces the knowledges and makes for a valuable experience. With these tips in mind, I wish you all the best in your studies and on your surgical rotation!