Leading article

Surgical wisdom

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The best surgeons are recognizable by more than technical excellence and superior knowledge, essential as these attributes are. Although often senior, it is more than age and experience that distinguishes them. They are the colleagues from whom others seek advice because they tend to make good decisions. They willingly provide guidance and support. Their actions match their opinions, and their outcomes justify their practice. They appreciate the context and drivers of doubt confronting any choice, and their advice is grounded in common sense. They provide mentorship for many peers and juniors, and indeed are the ones sought out to do so. In describing them we may say such surgeons are wise, and that it is their wisdom that inspires our admiration.

This article considers the attributes that make up surgical wisdom, in the hope that surgeons at all stages of their careers can aspire to wise practice.

What is wisdom?

Wisdom is a complex human trait that transcends generation and culture. It embodies elements of rational decision-making, general knowledge of life, empathy, compassion and altruism, comprehension of divergent values, emotional stability, insight or self-reflection, and the ability to proceed and progress in the face of uncertainty[1].

Aristotle had a particularly practical view of wisdom. He proposed that being wise required the ability to see, on each occasion, which course of action was best supported by reason. By doing so, a wise person 'lives well'[2]. To Aristotle, wisdom was both an intellectual and a moral phenomenon that grew with experience and time, was determined by choice and was acquired by habit.

Just as one who makes good decisions in life 'lives well', a surgeon who consistently chooses the best course of action 'practises well'. So what is it that makes a wise surgeon?

Competence and professionalism

Competence and professionalism are prerequisites for wise practice. Competence encompasses the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to be a surgeon. Many surgical training programmes now have competency-based frameworks encompassing technical and non-technical skills. There are seven competencies within CanMEDS[3] and nine outlined by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons[4] covering medical and technical expertise, decision-making, communication, collaboration and teamwork, management and leadership. Much has been done to make competencies definable, teachable and assessable[5,6].

Professionalism refers to the moral, cognitive and collegial aspects of practice, such as putting patients first, managing conflicts of interest, honesty and confidentiality, disclosing errors, self-regulation and advocacy[7,8].

Competence and professionalism are minimum standards expected by peers, patients, the public and regulators. Surgical wisdom is something more. The difference seems to lie in four additional attributes that, together, enable the wise surgeon consistently to choose the best course of action. These attributes are superior judgement, rich understanding, few unjustified beliefs and a strong moral compass.

Superior judgement

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wise person as one who is 'capable of judging truly concerning what is right or fitting, having the ability to perceive and adopt the best means for accomplishing an end'[9].

A surgeon who consistently makes good decisions necessarily has excellent clinical skills and situational awareness. He or she takes into account many things specific to the patient and the illness, available resources and the state of the team. Even when confronted with unfamiliar challenges, the appropriate probabilities and risks are considered, and the contextualized behaviours are fitting. In our own moments of indecision we are likely to wonder 'what a wise surgeon would do in this situation'.

Superior judgement allows for rapid and accurate assessment of a situation and the formulation of an action plan. According to Abernathy and Hamm[10], such intuition is a characteristic of experts and depends on cognitive scripts, which are organized compilations of relevant knowledge gained through learning and experience.

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Rich understanding

To Aristotle, 'living well' required a rich understanding of the nature of things and how they fit together as a whole. A wise surgeon understands 'the ways in which the world works'. This includes understanding of self, the nature of surgical illness and the role of surgery, the clinical environment, and the complexities of local, regional and national healthcare delivery.

The wise surgeon also has a rich understanding of the extreme nature of patients' experience when undergoing surgery. Little[11] characterised this as an ordeal to be endured, a need for rescue from something so serious as to warrant an operation, a sense of proximity and privileged knowledge inherent in the surgical encounter, and the physical and emotional aftermath. By his or her presence on rounds, visits and by telephone calls, the surgeon provides reassurance and support[11].

Few unjustified beliefs

Wise is the opposite of foolish, and being foolish means believing or stating what is not true, or doing things that are not warranted[9]. The wise person, therefore, has few beliefs that cannot be justified through fact, experience and reason. The wise surgeon not only has a good knowledge of what works and what does not, but can also justify this reasoning to colleagues.

In contrast, the unwise surgeon places too much trust in unfounded 'facts' or 'strategies,' has a poor knowledge base, an ambivalent attitude towards doing what is best or ignorance whether outcomes attest to good performance.

A strong moral compass

Aristotle also regarded wisdom to be the ultimate expression of virtue, or moral excellence. Virtue originates in our innermost thoughts and desires. It determines what we value, and the beliefs, ideas and opinions that come to represent a personal ethic.

Moral excellence and integrity, not just rigidly adhered-to beliefs, guide the wise surgeon towards right and good actions. When making difficult and complex decisions, the interests of patients usually represent true north on the moral compass.

Wisdom requires not just having good values and ethics, but also living and modelling those values, perhaps better described as 'walking the talk'. Living the values that one espouses may be especially challenging when faced with unexpected clinical demands at inconvenient times, or when compromised by difficult relationships with patients or colleagues.

Becoming wise

Completion of training signifies competence sufficient for clinical practice, and throughout their careers surgeons are expected to continue to learn, mature and gain experience.

Wisdom, however, is not just the accretion of layers of experience upon a core of taught competencies. Nor is it attained solely by learning general rules and adhering to them. Wisdom is an emergent property of highly integrated brain functioning, developed through upbringing and habit.

Superior judgement requires the deliberative, emotional and social skills that are refined by solving problems many times over. Rich understanding comes from thinking about things deeply, and from curiosity and questioning. Surgeons who have few unjustified beliefs habitually read, analyse, reflect and welcome feedback to improve their performance. Values that underpin a strong moral compass are fostered through explicit commitment to the welfare of patients.

Excellent performance, and wise surgical practice, occur when superior judgement and decision-making are exercised by a competent and professional surgeon with considerable experience, who thoroughly understands most situations, has reasonable and evidence-based beliefs about practice options, and does what is right and best. This combination of qualities, embodying professional attributes and individual ethos, personifies a wise surgeon.

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