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Correspondence

Basic surgical skills course – Why is it so costly?



H I G H L I G H T S

- Courses can be expensive and are often criticised for the transparency of associated costs.
- It is important to appreciate the organisational costs of running high quality courses.
- The three Royal Colleges in the UK do not use courses as profit making vehicles.

Letter

In the UK, three main colleges; namely the Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCSEng), Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd) and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (RCPSG), offer the world renowned basic surgical skills (BSS) course. This course has been running since 1994 providing doctors with a general overview of theatre etiquette and technical skills required by surgical practitioners. Its main aim is to enhance the standard of patient safety and care, through training in a controlled environment using models, animal tissue and stimulators under consultant/senior supervision and guidance. Assessment is carried out throughout the duration of the course and a certificate awarded at upon successful completion. Courses are hosted by the colleges six to eight times a year, often across multiple centres in the UK usually running for two days. The standard cost of attending a course varies substantially, with the cheapest fee advertised at the RCSEd (£585) and the dearest at the RCSEng (£730). The RCPSG charges £680. However prices are discounted for affiliates with costs ranging between £505–657. Although the course is available to all medical professionals, it is targeted towards junior doctors primarily foundation year and core surgical trainees (or equivalent). It is important to stress that the course is not a mandatory requirement prior to entering core surgical training, however it is widely appreciated as being essential in demonstrating basic surgical competencies to colleagues and potential employers.

Postgraduate courses can be costly for a variety of reasons which can often lead to criticism. But is it reasonable to be charging junior doctors such substantial sums of money without justification? After all the UK government is encouraging financial transparency from all businesses and organisations. Many online blogs accepted these costs as a necessary expense, amounting to a fraction of their income. However some reported building up significant amounts of credit card debts to fund their post-graduate learning. Others acknowledged that doctors from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds may struggle with such high costs, especially when combined with costs of other courses, college examinations, and

attending conferences. Core surgical trainees may be entitled to support from their local deanery study leave budget to attend such courses, however foundation trainees are often exempt with funding often limited to facilitate attendance to the Advance Life Support course.

We decided to contact all three colleges, with emails sent to their respective course administrators, asking them whether it would be possible for them to provide a breakdown of costs associated with running the basic surgical skills course. Two colleges replied, but neither provided a financial breakdown. Both emphasised “development and delivery of high quality courses to be priority” which required “considerable resources”. They stated courses were “not treated as profit making vehicles” and any surplus revenue was reinvested. The respective colleges were subsequently contacted through telephone conversation. The RCPSG was the only college to offer any further information, and the other colleges advising contact with their financial director which was also attempted without any success. They described the cost associated with each course to fluctuate between £7500–10,000 as it was determined by a number of factors which varied from course to course. These included; the number of candidates, faculty expenses, course materials, catering, geographical location, facilities, administrative costs and course development contingencies. No further breakdown was therefore possible. Each course had the potential to cater for a maximum of 20 candidates which would estimate costs to be approximately £500 per candidate per course.

In summary, the cost of the BSS course may appear to be high. However it is important to appreciate the organisational costs of delivering a standard of teaching which is of high quality involving senior members of medical staff, at accessible locations and using materials to mimic clinical scenarios. This is not only a challenge confined to surgical courses but extends to all postgraduate training courses.

Conflict of interest

None.

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