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EDITORIAL

Funding surgeons in South America

Financiación de cirujanos en Sudamérica

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Funding is certainly an important component of surgical research. We are currently living in an era marked by a problematic global economic crisis following a pandemic, geopolitical instability, energy shortages, and several other factors [1]. Surgeons have traditionally been less engaged in seeking and applying for funding. A North American study [2] showed that only 0.7% of surgeon-scientists are funded, and most of them work in basic science. But why are clinical surgeons so ineffective in this area? Is funding truly necessary? Where are the opportunities?

Surgeons may struggle to identify and secure funding for several reasons. One is the intense clinical workload—surgeons typically work longer hours than other clinicians [3]. However, this does not prevent them from conducting research, as there are several successful clinical surgeon-scientists. Academic performance may parallel clinical productivity [4]. Additionally, surgeons often face a delayed career start. This can push them toward full-time clinical practice to support a family, purchase a home, and meet other financial obligations.

Second, there is a lack of tradition. Surgeons frequently claim that obtaining funding is difficult or laborious without even attempting it. The surgical environment lacks a culture of funding, unlike other medical specialties or health-related professions. Surgeons trained in highly funded institutions tend to be more successful in obtaining funding themselves [5]. This lack of tradition affects not only the surgical field but also funding agencies, institutions, and administrators, who often allocate more resources to non-surgeons or to basic science. Surgical departments rarely have dedicated administrative support to assist with grant applications.

Keywords: research financing; research expenditures; surgeons; public-private sector partnerships; South America.

Palabras clave: financiación de la investigación; gastos en investigación; cirujanos; asociación entre el sector público-privado; Sudamérica.

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Finally, certain personality traits commonly associated with surgeons—such as a sense of omnipotence, arrogance [6], and lower openness to experience [7]—may play a role. Unfortunately, this reflects aspects of our own professional culture. Surgeons are also generally unaccustomed to bureaucracy and tend to prefer the operating room over administrative responsibilities [8]. These traits may further discourage engagement in the funding process.

Why is funding necessary? First, it supports research, improving study quality and enabling the acquisition of permanent equipment that may also be used in clinical practice. Second, it can strengthen a surgeon's standing within their institution. Some institutions require surgeons to obtain grants to enhance departmental rankings within universities and funding agencies. In addition, grants may be necessary to maintain eligibility to supervise graduate students or to obtain academic titles (e.g., certification). In the United States, though rarely in South America, grants may also cover part of a researcher's salary.

Where are the opportunities? Each country has its own local context. Generally, resources may come from governmental funding agencies or the private sector. These agencies may or may not be transparent and may have varying degrees of bias. Again, regional realities differ. In the private sector, conflicts of interest may influence the selection of funding recipients. There is often a shift favoring private institutions over public ones. In South America, public universities are generally stronger academically than private ones, but they are often underfunded. This situation forces private companies to invest in private hospitals that purchase their products, even if these institutions are not academically oriented. It is essential for each surgeon to understand their local context and seek guidance from more experienced colleagues.

In summary, surgeon-scientists are a reality, and the combination of research and clinical practice is more than feasible. This editorial was written by funded surgeons from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Colombia. Surgeons must maintain an open mind and demonstrate resilience, seek mentorship from colleagues who have successfully obtained grants—even outside of surgery—and be prepared to invest significant effort in navigating bureaucracy, facing failed attempts, and overcoming an unfavorable environment.

Compliance with ethical standards

Informed consent: This is a reflexion article, and as such, there is no need for informed consent or approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee.

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