

**My Life as a Surgeon:
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“My path to becoming a surgeon was not very traditional and a little off the beaten path!”

Questions:



1. Why did you become a doctor?

“Fooled by Randomness”: I never set out to be a doctor. I ended up as a physician through a series of random twists. I grew up in Lebanon and had settled on an engineering career. The educational system in Lebanon is modeled after the French structure: The last year of high school (roughly equivalent to the sophomore year in college) presents a choice of three concentrations: liberal arts, biological sciences, or “elementary” mathematics. I chose the latter with the anticipation of attending a *lycée* in Paris for two years to prepare for a highly competitive entrance exam to the engineering *Grandes Ecoles*. I was highly interested in the *Ecole Polytechnique*. Two problems stood in the way: funding, which I partially resolved through an academic scholarship, and the fact that I was not quite 17 yet and ineligible to apply for a passport without my parents’ consent. They did not approve of a move to Paris at such a young age. Since my English was not that great, I decided to apply to the American University of Beirut (AUB), assuming I could force the issue by being denied admission. Unfortunately, I was admitted and when asked to declare a major, I inquired if there was anything I could study for only two years that would allow me then to return to my original plan. “Pre-Medicine” was the only two-year program. Only one in five students got admitted to medical school after those two years, so I signed up. I made many friends during those two years, and surprisingly enjoyed the American educational system far more than I expected. I was pleased to be admitted to medical school two years later.

2. Why did you become a surgeon?

That was a simpler decision. I liked all specialties except OB-GYN. Surgery provided the best match for my personality and the opportunity to make quick decisions, reconstruct anatomy, and observe treatment outcomes quickly.



3. When did you decide to become a surgeon?

Did you have an epiphany? What was it?

The process was also a little random. The last year of medical school at the time (fifth year) was an internship by Lebanese law. The raging civil war had made most services very slow except for surgery, especially trauma. So, I signed up for a surgical internship to avoid staying too idle. Most AUB graduates traveled after internship to the US for training. It just happened that in January 1978, six months before my graduation, a new immigration law was passed in the US limiting training of foreigners to two years on a J1 Visa that could be extended to a maximum of three. The options for training in Beirut were limited, so I continued in Surgery.

4. Did you develop a clear vision/mission for your surgical career? What was it?

Early on, this was not the case. I liked Vascular Surgery, but also many other subspecialties. When Dr. Henry Bahnson offered me a job to start a separate vascular service at the VA, I simply accepted. For the first few years, I was still engaged in general surgery practice, but in the early 1990s, I was lucky to catch the endovascular revolution early. The exciting and novel approaches to the management of vascular diseases provided me a clear vision to push that envelope and disseminate that knowledge. I developed local training opportunities for surgeons in practice, and because of the lack of a training program in Pittsburgh, I focused on developing a vascular training program - initially a fellowship, and later, an integrated residency as soon as it was cleared by the ACGME.

5. Who were your mentors? In what way for each?

Dr. Bahnson taught me to stand up for my beliefs, that patient care always came first, and that honesty and technical expertise are essential to our trade. Dr. Mark

Ravitch taught me to always question established approaches and evaluate alternatives. Dr. Thomas Starzl illustrated the power of persistence in achieving your goals.



6. Has your career been as envisioned/expected?

Actually, it unfolded in ways that were beyond my wildest dreams. The opportunities that were presented to me led me to travel the world, meet some very interesting physicians, engineers, and inventors, and make friendships across borders. It was also rewarded by leadership roles that I never could have envisioned. It allowed me to build the largest vascular training program in the country and watch more than 68 young men and women become accomplished vascular surgeons.

7. Expected and unexpected challenges

There was no shortage of challenges over the years - from trying to find a PGY-3 categorical position in the US to meet J1 Visa requirements, to deciding on and resolving immigration issues; from gaining acceptance as an FMG (Foreign Medical Graduate), to convincing my elders to start a training program and expand practice to outreach hospitals; from gaining endovascular expertise, to the struggle of establishing the proper role of Vascular Surgery in modern day hospitals. One common thread: the first answer I received for anything I suggested was always a “no.” I would then remember Dr. Starzl and try again.

8. Tell us about a low point as a surgeon that led to a life lesson.

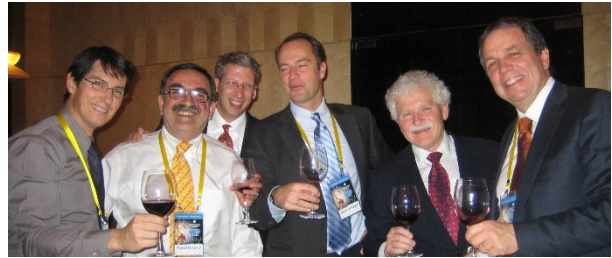
Mr. RH: One of my patients at the VA as a chief resident developed ischemic colitis one day post-op and died a week later, after a perfectly conducted open procedure that was performed in a record two hours at the time. I had ligated a widely open IMA as I had been taught. I should have reimplemented it. It reinforced a principle I tried to follow over the rest of my career: do not follow advice blindly, and “there is no detail too small...”

9. What has been the biggest challenge in your career?

The biggest challenge has been juggling a difficult and busy career with family life in the absence of an established support system.

10. Expected/unexpected rewards in your career?

There is nothing more rewarding than the gratitude of a patient and their family for taking care of them. A couple of years ago, I received a hand-written, heartfelt note from one of my patients who had a ruptured AAA almost 12 years earlier during a visit to her Pittsburgh family from North Carolina. She had not mailed it at the time. Her daughter mailed it five years after she passed away when she came across it while clearing her belongings. I read this note every time I have any doubts about my career choices.



11. What has been the biggest reward(s) in your career?

I have been rewarded with many professional honors and leadership positions over the years, but my biggest reward is the legion of young trainees who have graduated from our training program as Vascular Surgeons. Every success they have is a personal reward.

12. What would you do differently in your career?

Nothing. I try not to dwell too much over the past, since hindsight was never available to help with career decisions. This reminds me of a Lebanese saying my mom repeated every time I wondered what “could have been.” It can be loosely translated as: “Do not regret anything, it may have been better than the alternative.”

13. Of what accomplishment are you most proud/gratified in your career?

The UPMC Division of Vascular Surgery.

