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CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | Hamilton is a 'global surgery' hub

Young surgeons travel here from Guyana, Uganda and elsewhere to receive top training supervised by McMaster faculty.

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"Global surgery" is a relatively new field focused on improving access to safe, timely and affordable surgical care worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, Brian H. Cameron writes.

Chris Young/The Canadian Press file photo

By Brian H. Cameron

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Canadian Peter A. Singer, the former CEO of Grand Challenges Canada, recently wrote in the New York Times that “the golden age of global health as led by the United States is over.”

How are we in Canada responding to the threats to global health systems? One way is by developing and sharing our expertise in “global surgery.”

We sometimes understandably complain about wait times for surgery at home, but we also know that two-thirds of the world’s population lacks access to safe surgical care. For example, appendicitis has a quick surgical cure, but it can kill you if your care is delayed, even in some isolated parts of Canada. The same applies to obstetric care such as emergency caesarean section, unavailable to many of Canada’s remote communities.

It may surprise you to learn that providing emergency and essential surgical care is more cost-effective than vaccines in preventing death and disability. Safe surgery is a key part of primary health care.

Global surgery is a relatively new field focused on improving access to safe, timely and affordable surgical care worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The concepts apply equally in Canada. Global surgery encompasses research, education and advocacy aimed at strengthening health systems and addressing disparities in surgical care.

Hamilton is a national leader in global surgery. St. Joseph’s international outreach program and McMaster University’s department of surgery have developed unique surgical training collaborations with numerous countries over the past several decades.

The next time you are receiving surgical care in a local hospital, you may be met by a junior doctor with an unfamiliar accent. Young surgeons travel here from Guyana, Uganda and elsewhere to receive top training supervised by McMaster faculty. The visiting residents and fellows work alongside our local trainees to help with your care here, and then they return home to become surgical leaders and teachers in their home countries. This is a sustainable model of human development and boosts Canada’s reputation as a reliable educational partner.

Volunteer Canadian faculty also travel overseas to teach alongside their international colleagues. As a visiting pediatric surgeon in Guyana, I experienced first-hand how their surgical capacity-building has stimulated wider improvements in their whole health-care system. That experience made me a better surgeon and teacher here at McMaster.

As Singer wrote about global health, “Greater self-reliance is the path to truly sustainable development. The key to creating that independence is supporting local scientists and entrepreneurs (and) expanding homegrown health services.” Global surgery is not a one-way charity; it is two-way partnerships.

International partnerships stimulate innovation in both directions. We benefit from “reverse innovation” when new practices from the global south flow to the global north. Examples include telemedicine to remote areas, cellphone referral systems and low-cost technologies like portable medical devices and ketamine anesthesia developed abroad and adopted here.

Safe surgery is a team sport, and new innovations are shifting surgical tasks and using technology in surgical care and training globally. In recognition of these changes, McMaster is pioneering a new online [Graduate Diploma in Global Surgery: Surgical Care Systems and Health Equity](#). The course is open to anyone with an undergraduate degree, including health-care workers, innovators, engineers, business experts and policymakers keen to improve access to surgical care worldwide.

Two of Canada’s defining points of identity are our health system and our multiculturalism. These attributes are connected. More than a third of our doctors are immigrants, and many also volunteer to improve health care in their country of origin. Canada’s challenges in geography and diversity allow us to develop unique health and education solutions for our own rural and remote regions and share them with the rest of the world.

Let me add a third defining Canadian characteristic. Canadians care about the rest of the world and believe in the oneness of humanity. In Hamilton, we are helping fill the current gap in global health left by our neighbours. Global surgery puts everyone first.

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