# Being a Dad and a Spine Surgeon!

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Whilst women currently make up the majority of medical students in most universities, the vast majority of consultant surgeons in the UK are male (86.8%)1 and this percentage is even higher in spinal surgery. The reasons for this are multifactorial and due to concerted efforts the representation of women in spinal surgery and surgical careers in general is slowly increasing.2 Discussing fatherhood and surgery in general can be a classic taboo subject, however having such discussions around parenting and work life balance is more relevant than ever.

With men representing the majority of spinal surgeons (in training and at consultant level) it is easy to make certain assumptions and accept classic stereotypes. Some may relate to the stereotypically brilliant surgeon who is a “surgical hero” and is worshipped in his hospital, maybe even in others. Some of the hidden and unfortunate costs may include being a stranger at home, breakdown of relationships and perhaps his children loathing him for doing what he felt was best for the family and never being around. Whilst this is not exclusive only to men in surgery, the medical society seems to be more accepting, maybe even celebrate the title of the “Absent or Non- Resident Father” (ANRF).

## Challenges faced by potential father

Some of the challenges faced by the surgeon fathers (not exclusively) include:

* **Stigma and Labelling** – living up to the archetypal surgeon role
* **Rewards & Expectation of being Present** – the expectation to be present in every theatre list and every clinic with minimal disruption to service provision and training. Diminishing of the classic implied rewards of career progression for the ever present, “good and reliable guy”
* **Societal Norms** –the “man” is classically expected to go out and be the breadwinner
* **Economic Trends** – increasing financial pressures, reliance on joint earning capacity, changing work patterns and accommodating medical/surgical partners and spouses
* **Changes in Caregiving roles** – non traditional family structures and evidence of the societal impact of ANRF.3

## Modern Surgeon Fathers

Anecdotally it would appear that the modern Surgeon father like any modern father, has slowly evolved. Traditional family structures and roles have changed significantly and there is a large body of evidence suggesting that a father’s affection and active involvement in family life helps in the promotion of children’s emotional and social well being.4

For surgeon fathers that do want to be more involved in the lives of their children, timely decisions will have to be made. The question then becomes who makes the decisions, the individual or the system.

Significant effort and resources have been made available by the Royal College of Surgeons regarding parenting in surgery and flexible working.5 Often times it is the individuals preconceived ideas that places pressure on them regarding their prioritisation of work- and work-related activities.

A career in spinal surgery is stressful enough. Juggling that with a family and fatherhood can either help with the stress or tip you over the edge. Below are some helpful tips

1. **Plan –** Timing is everything. When it has occurred (planned or fortuitously) having children around key training milestones can be advantageous e.g. preparing for key exams during parental leave and the relative ease of relocating a young family for fellowships.
2. **Identifier the stressors** – Stress and burnout can present gradually. Effective time management and making time for the family are valuable ways of relieving stress and recharging.
3. **Be Honesty –** Having a family isn’t for everyone. It is important to assess where family life fits into ones personal goals and ambitions.
4. **Know your options –** More men are considering flexible training and flexible working in surgery including shared parental leave 5,6. Learning from the experiences of others can be invaluable in making such decisions.

## Conclusion

Like most things in life, being a more present surgical father is usually a matter of choice. With an increasing appreciating that its often the small moments in time that lead to big memories, there is a growing trend for fathers to be more present in family life. There is increasing emphasis on surgeon support, equity, and flexibility of work. Widening the scope of such discussions with current and future generation of spine surgeons may represent an opportunity to further appreciate family demands on working life which may contribute to positively shaping future working patterns.

For more information please see the resources below and feel free to continue to the discussion on our chat forum

## Additional Resources

https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay

https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/careers-in-surgery/careers-support/flexible-training-and-working/

https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/stress/?WT.tsrc=Search&WT.mc\_id=Stress&gclid=CjwKCAiAsaOBBhA4EiwAo0\_AnHIcalt2Ib4fb0F2T-68nUmgU9GGDY3NWFwMnB\_qJaFTwgIKPAfBThoCczIQAvD\_BwE

## Reference

1. https://www.statista.com/statistics/698260/registered-doctors-united-kingdom-uk-by-gender-and-specialty/
2. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/careers-in-surgery/women-in-surgery/parenthood-with-a-surgical-career/>
3. <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/changing-father>
4. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2000). Factors associated with fathers' caregiving activities and sensitivity with young children. Journal of Family Psychology, 14(2), 200-219.
5. https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/careers-in-surgery/women-in-surgery/parenthood-with-a-surgical-career/parenthood-in-surgery-profiles/
6. https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay