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What Do Undergraduate Medical Students Value in Plastic Surgery Conferences?

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Background: Medical students often have misconceptions about plastic surgery, and improving undergraduate education in the field remains a priority. Conferences—delivered in-person or online—are commonly used to enhance access and awareness. However, there is limited literature on (1) student interest in oncoplastic breast surgery and (2) what medical students value in plastic surgery conference education.

Methods: In collaboration with the Association of Breast Surgery, we organized 6 hybrid-format lectures focused on breast surgery. Attendees completed optional pre- and postconference surveys, which were analyzed statistically. Semistructured interviews were conducted with a random sample of 30 respondents and thematically analyzed.

Results: The event was attended by 111 medical students, with 102 completing both surveys. There was a statistically significant increase in interest in oncology, plastic surgery, and oncoplastic breast surgery following the conference ($P < 0.05$). Student attitudes toward breast surgery also improved. Thematic analysis revealed that students valued conferences for increasing exposure to the field and helping shape career interests. In-person conferences were particularly appreciated for their networking opportunities and practical workshops.

Conclusions: Conferences effectively promote interest and awareness of plastic surgery among medical students. Although in-person formats offer greater interactivity, virtual events provide accessible and scalable alternatives. Future research should focus on developing longitudinal educational initiatives and evaluating the long-term influence of undergraduate events on career decision-making in plastic surgery. (*Plast Reconstr Surg Glob Open* 2025;13:e7239; doi: [10.1097/GOX.0000000000007239](https://doi.org/10.1097/GOX.0000000000007239); Published online 7 November 2025.)

INTRODUCTION

Plastic surgery remains a relatively misunderstood specialty among medical students, often surrounded by misconceptions regarding its scope and role in patient care. Multiple studies have highlighted the limited exposure to plastic surgery in undergraduate medical education, and how media portrayals disproportionately influence students' perceptions—often focusing on cosmetic procedures while overlooking the breadth of reconstructive and functional surgery offered within the field.^{1–5}

Consequently, subspecialties such as oncoplastic breast surgery are frequently underrepresented in the curriculum, and many students graduate without a clear understanding of specialist plastic surgical knowledge.^{6–9}

Efforts to address this educational gap have included structured courses, surgical skills workshops, and shadowing opportunities. Such interventions have consistently demonstrated improvements in both knowledge and interest among medical students.^{10–15} Shadowing and direct clinical experience, in particular, have been shown to enhance student enthusiasm and dispel misconceptions surrounding the specialty.^{16–18} Even single, one-off educational events have been effective in promoting plastic surgery as a potential career path.^{19,20}

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online education, prompting a shift from traditional

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in-person teaching to virtual platforms. Online conferences offer several advantages, including lower cost, greater accessibility, and the ability to reach a geographically diverse audience. Antezana et al²¹ noted that high in-person conference costs can limit medical student participation. In contrast, virtual events allow broader engagement and enable access to mentors and specialists not locally available.^{22–24} Knaus and Cheng²⁵ reported success with an online plastic surgery teaching series that attracted wide viewership and covered subspecialist topics not typically accessible in all institutions. These findings highlight the potential of online platforms in delivering high-quality, expert-led plastic surgery education.

Nonetheless, some skepticism remains around the value of virtual learning in surgical education—particularly in delivering hands-on skills. Despite this, online teaching continues to hold value for conceptual learning, mentorship, and career exploration.

Oncoplastic breast surgery exemplifies the interdisciplinary nature of modern surgical practice. In the United Kingdom, it involves close collaboration between general surgeons, who manage the oncological aspect, and plastic surgeons, who reconstruct the breast to optimize cosmetic outcomes. At our local centers, we are fortunate to collaborate with plastic surgeons who specialize in oncoplastic breast surgery and actively contribute to medical student teaching.

To date, there is a lack of published literature specifically investigating (1) medical student interest in oncoplastic breast surgery and (2) what students value in conference-based plastic surgery education. This study therefore aimed to explore whether conferences can effectively introduce medical students to lesser-known subspecialties, such as oncoplastic breast surgery. Additionally, we seek to evaluate the perceived benefits of online versus in-person formats in delivering plastic surgery education.

METHODOLOGY

In partnership with local plastic surgeons and the Association of Breast Surgery (ABS), we organized a half-day hybrid conference consisting of 6 lectures focused on oncoplastic breast surgery. Sessions included:

1. ABS Conference Bursaries
2. A Day in the Life of an Oncoplastic Surgeon
3. Career Pathways in Breast Surgery
4. Building a Surgical Portfolio
5. A Medical Student's Perspective
6. A Patient's Experience with Breast Surgery

The event was held at the University of Central Lancashire and live-streamed via Microsoft Teams. Attendance was free, with funding provided by the ABS. Typically, conference fees ranged from \$20 to \$100 for undergraduate societies and \$150 to \$250 for international conferences. (See table, Supplemental Digital Content 1, which displays specific learning objectives for each lecture, <https://links.lww.com/PRSGO/E443>.)

Promotion was done through social media, linking to the event registration form. Delegates were asked to

Takeaways

Question: What do medical students value in a plastic surgery conference and attitudes toward oncoplastic breast surgery?

Findings: A 1-day hybrid conference was organized with a special interest in breast surgery. Students reported a significant increase in interest in plastic surgery and had a change in attitude toward oncoplastic breast surgery. In-person conferences are valued more financially because of the importance medical students place on networking and workshops.

Meaning: Although online conferences are convenient, in-person conferences hold more value for medical students who are looking to explore plastic surgery.

complete optional pre- and postconference questionnaires (see Tables 1, 2). Paired *t* tests were used to analyze the impact on student interest and topic awareness, with significance set at a *P* value of less than 0.05. A power calculation using Cohen *d* was performed ($\beta = 0.20$, $\alpha = 0.05$).

Following the event, 30 students were randomly selected from consenting participants for semistructured interviews via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and thematically analyzed using the Braun and Clarke²⁶ method (Tables 1, 2).

RESULTS

Results From the Questionnaire

A total of 111 delegates attended the hybrid conference. Pre- and postconference questionnaires were completed by 102 participants (92% response rate), all of whom were medical students. This sample size achieved sufficient statistical power across all assessed domains. Analysis of the responses revealed a statistically significant increase in interest across several specialties: (1) oncology: mean interest score increased from 3.55 to 3.97; (2) plastic surgery: increased from 3.38 to 3.75; and (3) oncoplastic breast surgery: increased from 3.29 to 3.71 ($P < 0.05$ for all comparisons).

The largest change in mean interest was observed in oncology (+0.42). Although a small increase in overall

Table 1. Preconference Questions and Options

Preconference Questions	Response Options
How interested are you in surgery?	5: Extremely interested
How interested are you in oncology?	4: Very interested
How interested are you in plastic surgery?	3: Neutral
How interested are you in oncoplastic breast surgery?	2: Slightly interested
	1: Not interested
How aware are you of the training pathway requirements to pursue surgery?	5: Extremely aware
	4: Very aware
	3: Neutral
	2: Slightly aware
	1: No information
State 3 words you associate with oncoplastic breast surgery	Open question

interest in surgery was noted—from 4.20 to 4.32—this change was not statistically significant (Tables 3, 4).

In response to the questions, “How aware are you about the academic training pathway in oncoplastic breast surgery?” and “How aware are you about the requirements to pursue a career in oncoplastic breast surgery?”, the mean scores increased from 2.73 to 4.08 and from 3.26 to 4.26, respectively. Both increases were statistically significant ($P < 0.05$).

Regarding cost expectations, the mean amount attendees were willing to pay for an in-person conference was £22.99 ± 25.19 (\$30.49 ± 33.41), whereas the mean for an online conference was £8.58 ± 9.78 (\$11.38 ± 12.97) (Fig. 1). The median amount students were willing to pay was £10 (\$13.30) for in-person and £5 (\$6.63) for online conferences. A conversion rate of £1 to \$1.33 was used for currency conversion, accurate as of May 16, 2025.

Before the event, the most associated words with oncoplastic breast surgery among attendees were *cancer* (31%), *interesting* (11%), *reconstruction* (9%), *cosmetic* (8%), *plastics* (7%), *complex* (7%), *mastectomy* (7%), and *lumpectomy* (5%) (Fig. 2).

Following the conference, attendees’ word associations shifted. The most frequently reported terms were *interesting* (19%), *work-life balance* (15%), *cancer* (13%),

mastectomy (13%), *surgery* (8%), *plastics* (8%), and *reconstruction* (6%) (Fig. 3).

Results From Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Thematic analysis of 30 semistructured interviews revealed 4 key themes.

Exposure Drives Interest

Students consistently stated that exposure is fundamental to developing an interest in any specialty. Many highlighted that without adequate curricular coverage or clinical placements, it is difficult to appreciate the full scope of a specialty such as plastic or oncoplastic breast surgery. Participants emphasized that events offering specialist insights—such as our conference—played a critical role in shaping their career considerations. Several advocated for more specialty-specific events to support early interest formation.

Strong Preference for In-person Conferences

Most students preferred in-person over online formats, reporting greater engagement and retention of information during face-to-face sessions. Two subthemes explained this preference.

Socialization and Networking. Students valued interacting with peers and speakers in real time, citing that these interactions fostered a sense of professional community and made the learning environment more immersive. Opportunities to ask spontaneous questions and network were seen as unique advantages of in-person settings.

Value of Practical Workshops. Hands-on workshops were particularly praised. Students felt these sessions deepened their understanding, dispelled misconceptions, and provided practical insight into the specialty. Many said workshops helped solidify their interest in pursuing surgical careers.

Convenience of Online Conferences

Despite the preference for in-person events, students acknowledged that online conferences offer valuable flexibility. Remote access allows participation regardless of financial, geographic, or time-related constraints. This convenience was especially appreciated by students with limited resources or busy schedules.

Table 2. Postconference Questions and Options

Postconference Questions	Response Options
How interested are you in surgery after the conference?	5: Extremely interested
How interested are you in oncology after the conference?	4: Very interested 3: Neutral
How interested are you in plastic surgery after the conference?	2: Slightly interested 1: Not interested
How interested are you in oncoplastic breast surgery after the conference?	
How aware are you of the training pathway requirements to pursue surgery after the conference?	5: Extremely aware 4: Very aware 3: Neutral 2: Slightly aware 1: No information
What is the maximum amount you would pay to attend an online conference?	Open question
What is the maximum amount you would pay to attend an in-person conference?	
State 3 words you associate with oncoplastic breast surgery	Open question

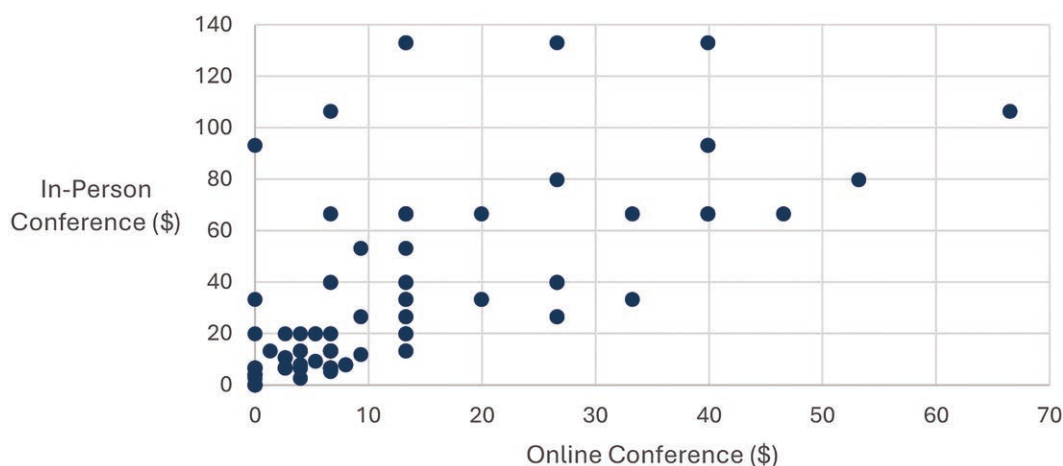
Table 3. Impact on Attendees’ Interest in Different Specialties

Specialty	Self-rated Mean Interest Preconference	Self-rated Mean Interest Postconference	Difference	P
How interested are you in surgery?	4.20	4.32	0.127	0.3136
How interested are you in oncology?	3.55	3.97	0.422	0.00172
How interested are you in plastic surgery?	3.38	3.75	0.362	0.0168
How interested are you in oncoplastic breast surgery?	3.29	3.71	0.412	0.00246
How aware are you about the academic training pathway in oncoplastic breast surgery	2.73	4.08	1.35	<0.00001
How aware are you about the requirements to pursue a career in oncoplastic breast surgery	3.26	4.26	1.00	<0.00001

Table 4. Impact on Awareness and Interest in Plastic and Oncoplastic Surgery

Specialty	Self-rated Mean Interest Precon- ference (3) (Max. 5)	Self-rated Mean Interest Postcon- ference (3) (Max. 5)	Difference (3)
How interested are you in oncology?	3.55	3.97	0.422
How interested are you in plastic surgery?	3.38	3.75	0.362
How interested are you in oncoplastic breast surgery?	3.29	3.71	0.412
How aware are you about the academic training path- way in oncoplastic breast surgery?	2.73	4.08	1.35
How aware are you about the requirements to pursue a career in oncoplastic breast surgery?	3.26	4.26	1.00

What attendees are willing to pay for a conference


Fig. 1. How much would attendees pay for an in-person conference vs an online conference.

34 respondents (31%) answered **Cancer** for this question.


Fig. 2. Three words participants associate with oncoplastic breast surgery preconference word cloud.

20 respondents (20%) answered **Interesting** for this question.


Fig. 3. Three words participants associate with oncoplastic breast surgery postconference word cloud.

Narrow Perception of Breast Surgery

When asked what first came to mind regarding research in breast surgery, all 30 interviewees responded with “breast cancer.” Although some acknowledged other breast conditions, the universal association with cancer suggests that students perceive the specialty narrowly. This indicates a potential gap in understanding the broader scope of breast surgery and highlights the need for more comprehensive exposure.

DISCUSSION

Studies estimate that 24%–56% of medical students receive no exposure to plastic surgery during their training,^{2,27,28} underscoring the need for targeted educational interventions. This study demonstrated that even a single conference can significantly increase medical student interest in oncology, plastic surgery, and oncoplastic breast surgery ($P < 0.05$). Thematic analysis also revealed that students value conferences as opportunities to gain experience and develop interest in the field. Our findings align with previous research showing that one-off educational events can influence specialty interest²⁹ and support the growing body of literature on virtual programs designed to increase exposure to plastic surgery.^{30,31} Interestingly, overall interest in surgery did not significantly change, likely because attendees already had a high baseline interest—suggesting many were exploring a surgical career before the event.

Before the conference, students commonly associated oncoplastic surgery with terms such as *cancer* (31%) and surgical procedures such as *mastectomy* and *lumpectomy*, reflecting a textbook-level understanding. Only 11% associated the field with the term *interesting*. Postconference, terms shifted to broader concepts such as *work-life balance* and *interesting* (19%), whereas references to *cosmetic surgery* disappeared. This suggests that targeted educational events can reshape student perceptions and dispel misconceptions.

Students were willing to pay more for in-person conferences (£22.99/\$30.49) than online (£8.58/\$11.38), citing enhanced networking and interactivity—consistent with literature emphasizing the value of mentorship and hands-on exposure.^{18,32–35} Personal mentorship significantly increases the likelihood of pursuing plastic surgery,³⁶ but time constraints often limit access to one-on-one mentoring.³⁷

Virtual mentorship offers a practical solution, enabling broader connections and more flexible support. A systematic review by Raborn and Janis³⁸ demonstrated that remote surgical mentoring improves both trainee skills and patient outcomes, especially in settings with limited local mentorship.

Although students preferred in-person conferences, virtual formats provide scalable and standardized education—particularly valuable given the wide variation in plastic surgery exposure across UK medical schools.²⁸ Our program could be expanded across institutions to increase its reach and impact. Interestingly, only a few students mentioned cost as a barrier to in-person events,

which contrasts with studies highlighting affordability as a key deterrent to participation.³⁵

Although this hybrid conference increased short-term interest, it remains unclear whether such interventions have a long-term influence. Most current literature focuses on immediate postevent outcomes, with few studies tracking sustained interest or career choices over time.^{39,40} Future research should prioritize longitudinal educational models and follow-up evaluations to assess enduring impact.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, conferences are a valuable tool for cultivating interest and enhancing awareness of plastic surgery among medical students. Although in-person events seem to offer superior engagement and interactivity, online conferences provide an accessible and scalable alternative. Future research should prioritize the development of longitudinal educational programs and implement long-term follow-up to assess whether undergraduate events truly influence students' career choices in plastic surgery.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors have no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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