Medical Xpress

General surgery residents prefer flexible work hours for patient care, education

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CHICAGO (November 14, 2016): U.S. general surgery residents strongly prefer work hour policies that allow them the flexibility to work longer when needed to provide patient care over standard, more restrictive work schedules, according to results from a national survey conducted as part of the landmark Flexibility in Duty Hour Requirements for Surgical Trainees (FIRST) Trial. In fact, this preference for flexibility becomes even stronger as residents progress through their five years of training. The new analysis—a survey of more than 95 percent of the 3,700 surgeons in training who participated in the FIRST Trial—found that a striking 86 percent of surgical residents preferred flexible duty (work) hour policies over standard duty hours, or had no preference.

The survey findings appear online as an "article in press" on the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* website in advance of print publication.

Some controversy has recently surrounded resident duty hour policies and the FIRST Trial's examination of adding flexibility to residents' work schedules. However, until the FIRST Trial, high-quality, national data did not exist regarding the impact of these policies on patient care and resident well-being. The FIRST Trial was the first national randomized trial to compare standard surgical resident duty hour requirements with more flexible policies. The proposal on November 4 from a task force of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) for changes to resident duty hour policies was

prompted in part by results of the FIRST Trial.[1]

During the FIRST Trial, 59 general surgery residency programs adhered to standard duty hour policies, which the ACGME established in 2003 and 2011. The other 58 programs tested a flexible policy that waived certain ACGME rules on maximum shift lengths and mandatory time off between shifts, to allow the residents the flexibility to stay longer when needed to provide patient care or for educational opportunities. However, both groups were limited to an 80-hour workweek averaged over four weeks.

Findings of the FIRST Trial[2] published earlier this year in the *New England Journal of Medicine* demonstrated that easing current restrictions on surgical residents' schedules to allow for some flexibility did not worsen patient outcomes among general surgical patients and did not adversely affect overall resident well-being. Rather, residents in the flexible arm of the study noted several benefits with respect to patient care, continuity of care, and resident training.

This new survey analysis uncovers additional critical findings, as the researchers set out to determine if surgical residents within each study arm had different perceptions of patient safety, continuity of care, resident education and clinical training, and resident well-being at three distinct levels of training: interns (PGY-1), junior residents (PGY-2, PGY-3), and senior residents (PGY-4, PGY-5). [Note: PGY = Postgraduate Year of Training.]

"A striking finding from this new analysis is that the vast majority of residents at all levels preferred to work under flexible duty hour policies," said FIRST Trial principal investigator Karl Y. Bilimoria, MD, MS, FACS, Director of the Surgical Outcomes and Quality Improvement Center at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago. "If residents were in the flexible study arm, they

appreciated flexible duty hours even more and expressed an even stronger preference for working under flexible duty hour policies."

During the FIRST Trial, survey data were collected in collaboration with the American Board of Surgery, which administered the survey to all residents who took the American Board of Surgery In-Training Examination (ABSITE®) in January 2015.

Key findings in the major domain areas of the survey follow.

Resident Duty Hour Preferences

- Overall, residents expressed a strong preference for flexible duty hour polices, particularly if they had already experienced flexibility in their training.
- Only 14 percent of residents overall expressed a preference for training under standard duty hour policies.
- At all PGY levels, residents either expressed a preference for flexible training under flexible duty hour policies or no preference. Preference levels reported were: interns, 84.82 percent; junior residents, 84.04 percent; and senior residents, 88.93 percent (p

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