

"I often think what a privilege it is to operate on the human heart."

It was working as a humanitarian aid worker in Sarajevo and Kosovo during his A-levels that helped Omar decide to apply to medical school. He's now training to be a cardiac surgeon.

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Omar Jarral

How I got into the role

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After medical school I did a foundation year in general surgery and immediately loved surgery. I really liked the fact you saw immediate responses after operating on patients; it often meant there were huge changes in the chances of survival and quality of someone's life.

In my second foundation year, I got a placement in cardiothoracic surgery. I had some great mentors who gave me the opportunity to operate on patients with supervision, and to look after very sick patients on the [intensive care](#) ^[1] unit after cardiac surgery.

I knew then I wanted to be a cardiac surgeon and I got one of only five training places in London that year. I spent some of the time at the London Chest Hospital where senior surgeons trained and mentored me.

I never get bored of seeing the human heart, and seeing patients get back to normal lives after major surgery is very satisfying.

What I do

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I'm in theatre operating with my consultant for two or three days a week. I see patients the night before surgery so I'm fully aware of their background before they're on the operating table. We usually start at 7.30am with a team brief where we discuss the cases for that day with the consultant surgeon, consultant anaesthetist and the rest of the theatre team. We do two big cases a day and finish between 5 and 7pm. I usually stay behind for an hour or two to make sure the patients are doing well.

On an on call ^[2] or clinic day, the hours are the same but involve ward and intensive care ^[1] unit rounds, troubleshooting or dealing with referrals from other specialties. I often attend outpatient clinics with my consultant where we assess patients before their surgery and see them six to eight weeks afterwards to check they're recovering well.

The best bits and challenges

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The best bit is definitely the operating and I often think what a privilege it is to operate on the human heart. Working with great and highly-skilled colleagues is also fun, and seeing patients recover well is incredibly satisfying.

The biggest challenge is that, for various reasons, we trainees have far less exposure to operating than our predecessors and that's the one thing I'd change. In the UK, training to be a cardiothoracic surgeon takes ten to 13 years, depending on whether you choose to do research or extra sub-specialty fellowships. The hours are long and tiring and it's difficult to spend enough time with friends and family.

Life outside work

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I like climbing (bouldering and top roping), playing golf and mountain biking. Having hobbies and interests helps me relax and takes my mind off work.

To maintain a healthy work-life balance, I try to spend time with family and friends, eat healthily, exercise and meditate. But it's not always easy!

Career plans and top tips for others

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During medical school I did a degree in management because I wanted to broaden my mind in topics other than medicine. I've also done a PhD to examine patient recovery and blood flow after aortic root replacement surgery, and helped design new keyhole devices. These extended the length of my training, but I've travelled extensively, made new friends and presented research all over the world. It's all helped me develop and mature as a surgeon.

There's a myth that it's difficult to get into specialty training in surgery, but, if you're determined and hardworking, it's almost always possible. My tips for others are:

- do some work experience early and make sure you want to do the specialty you choose
- don't choose surgery just for the prestige! It will bring long term satisfaction if you have a genuine passion for it
- surgery is an apprenticeship so get good mentors at all stage of your training. Show enthusiasm and they will guide you
- be a good, kind and compassionate colleague. Providing high-quality care is only possible through working as a team

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