Letters and Comments

The surgical personality

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COMMENT ON

M Whitaker. The surgical personality: does it exist? *Ann R Coll Surg Engl* 2018; **100**: 72–77

I was interested to see the article on the surgical personality in the January 2018 issue of the *Annals*. The conclusion that surgeons as a group have distinctive traits will surprise no one but the nature of the described differences from non-surgeons are in some respects unexpected.

The author seems to have missed our paper on this topic,¹ which did not suffer from the faults of the articles he does cite although it only studied two of the traits he reports on. We found that surgeons were less neurotic and more extroverted than physicians in a large sample. Both our study and the present one have significant methodological limitations: ours had a rather low recruitment percentage, which makes it more prone to selection biases, while Whitaker's methods for recruitment were quite different in the two samples he used. I disagree with his rather bold suggestion that they are substantially equivalent and therefore not a likely source of bias. The definitions used for neuroticism and extraversion differ, and neither is necessarily what it is perceived to be by the lay public. Consequently, our disagreement may be due to these differences.

It might also be, for example, that clinicians as a group are more neurotic than the general population but that surgeons are less so than physicians. I suspect that the trait descriptions themselves may be too broad to capture some of the aspects of personality that interest both surgeons and the general public. Thus, the suggestion that female surgeons may (perforce) have had to be 'more surgical than other surgeons' to succeed in previous generations is intuitive and so, from experience, is the suggestion that older surgeons may suffer more anxiety.

The suggestion that surgeons as a group are more neurotic but not more extroverted than the general population, on the other hand, does not accord with common perceptions either inside or outside the profession. Here, the formal trait descriptions may be failing to represent the

picture accurately because they may lump together and attempt to summate a mixture of some characteristics typical of surgeons that might be regarded as signs of neuroticism (eg insistence on extreme attention to detail) with others that might appear to be signs of its absence (eg the ability to carry on calmly in emergency situations without exhibiting signs of excessive anxiety).

Further study of this topic is worthwhile for a number of very practical reasons, including the ability of surgeons to take part in research and learn about the way in which their work may cause them accumulating psychological damage over time.

Reference

1. McCulloch P, Kaul A, Wagstaff GF, Wheatcroft J. Tolerance of uncertainty, extroversion, neuroticism and attitudes to randomized controlled trials among surgeons and physicians. *Br J Surg* 2005; **92**: 1,293–1,297.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

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Thank you for your response to my paper. I read your own paper (which my literature search unfortunately failed to pick up) with interest. The difference in relative levels of neuroticism and extraversion among surgeons may indeed be due to the methodologies (self-reporting vs psychometric measurement), which is an interesting result in itself. The fact that your study found no correlation between age and neuroticism, for instance, is intriguing given the fairly strong correlation I found in my own data, and may be indicative of the gap between what a person may report about themselves and what may be revealed through less direct measurement.

The issue of non-response bias is also, as you suggest, worthy of more attention in my paper. The overrepresentation of women in the response group certainly indicates that the sample may not be perfectly representative. This may have some relevance to the differences discussed above. Extending the research to include other medical disciplines (and to a greater depth within the surgical profession) would undoubtedly be worthwhile.