

Participation in the Covidien Master Class Course on Laparoscopic Colorectal Surgery in Elancort in the Framework of the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® Scholarship

Petra Krause and Jonathan-Michael Harnoss

A scholarship from the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® enabled us to take part in a two-day Master Class course on laparoscopic colorectal surgery held in December 2009 at the Covidien company's European Training Center in Elancourt, France.

The Theodor Billroth Academy ® (TBA) was founded in 2008 by Prof. Björn Brücher, FACS, FRCS (Engl.) to provide encouragement and support for young surgeons. The TBA's ® annual summer courses are mainly intended for students in their early preclinical and first clinical semesters, in order to encourage an interest in surgery at an early stage in their studies. We — Petra Krause from Greifswald (6th clinical semester) and Jonathan-Michael Harnoss from Berlin (5th clinical semester) — were the students who received the first scholarships awarded at the First Summer School in 2008.

The Summer School of the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® includes both practical and theoretical sections. Topics dealt with in the practical section include the correct way of handling surgical instruments, learning various suturing and anastomosis techniques and various dissection techniques, as well as an endoscopy and laparoscopy course. All of this builds up towards a comprehensive surgical course in which the participants, with guidance from renowned surgeons from all over Germany, carry out operations on specially prepared cadavers.

The theoretical section consists of seminar-like lecture courses given by renowned representatives of the field of surgery in Germany (e.g., on wound healing, surgical research, and further training in surgery). It also includes other topics, such as oncology, immunology, radiology, and transfusion medicine, that have close interdisciplinary connections with surgery. In addition, this part features topics on the economics of the health-care system and business administration that are not included in the university curriculum, or only inadequately. The opportunity to talk to well-known figures from the field of surgery and related disciplines, as well as from the fields of health policy and business, was tremendously rewarding for us. By all of this, the Summer School of the Theodor-Billroth-Academy inspired us to join the discipline of surgery.

The scholarships that we were awarded after a test at the end of the First Summer School included firstly, participation at the 126th Conference of the German Society for Surgery in 2009 (including accommodation and travel costs); and secondly, the opportunity to participate in a Master Class course in Elancourt, granted by Covidien Germany Ltd., the principal sponsor of the TBA®.

We were invited to attend the Master Class course on laparoscopic colorectal surgery held in December 2009. As we now appreciate, the way in which this was structured—with a time delay before being invited to the 126th Conference of the German Society for Surgery, and another delay before the Master Class course—was well thought out in educational terms. It provided the time, developing the necessary precondition during the medical course as well as deepening the surgical knowledge and skills. We were met on arrival in our hotel in Versailles by Mr. Wolfgang Johannes, Training Manager at Covidien Germany Ltd., who invited us to dinner and explained the course arrangements.

Thirty surgeons with various levels of training and prior knowledge from all over Europe attended the course, which was led by Prof. Kessler (University of Erlangen), Prof. Kressner (Danderyd Hospital, Sweden), Dr. Gervaz (Geneva University Hospital, Switzerland) and Dr. Cecil (Pelican Centre, Basingstoke, England). The course was divided into theoretical and practical sections.

The theoretical section in the mornings consisted of lectures given by the four course leaders. The first day was mainly concerned with the left hemicolon and rectosigmoid, while the second day focused on the right hemicolon. The experts gave presentations on the anatomical basis, evidence-based differences between open and laparoscopic colorectal surgery, and on indications, early conversion, contraindications, complications, and laparoscopy in patients with marked obesity. The step-by-step introductions to the various colorectal operations, illustrated with videos, were particularly instructive. Starting with the placement of the trocars and continuing with mobilization of the colon and then the anastomosis, each step was described extremely precisely. It also became clear that there are various possible surgical techniques, each of which was preferred by one of the experts. The lecture by Dr. Cecil on the “dos and don’ts” of laparoscopic surgery was one of the high points. In the lecture, he presented videos of his own operations showing how to deal with venous and arterial bleeding and how to recover a resection specimen without causing tumor spread or wound infection, and also focusing on how to achieve exact demonstration of the surgical field without injuring the ureter, for example.

The practical part was held in the afternoons in the training center’s ultramodern laboratories. It focused on sigmoid resection, which we carried out in swine. We were each assigned to a team of two surgeons. On the first day, we mainly learned how to hold the camera, while on the second day we were also able to act as first assistant.

This involved placing the trocars, demonstrating the surgical field for the surgeon, clamping vessels, and creating the transanal anastomosis with a ring stapler. At the end of the course, we were even allowed to carry out a cholecystectomy. It was very helpful here that we had already had practice using various types of tissue and in cadavers, bowel and swine livers during the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® Summer School.

After a short visit to the Palace of Versailles, the day ended with a common social evening including all of the participants, held in the Hall of Mirrors at the Hôtel de France. This enabled us to get to know people better and provided an opportunity for interesting discussions in which we learned a great deal about surgical training in other European countries. For example, we were surprised that both our Dutch and British colleagues said that in their countries, there was no lack of young surgeons and that surgery is extremely popular among medical students.

Overall, we had an extremely instructive time that provided us with deep insights into the field of colorectal laparoscopy. We will certainly benefit tremendously from having this theoretical background in laparoscopic surgery during our next practical training periods and in the practical year, and we will be able to follow the operations better. We are now sensitized to be aware of the critical phases in the individual operations and can assess complications better. The practical part was extremely instructive. On the one hand, it was good to be able to try out the devices ourselves for once and carry out surgical steps that we are otherwise only able to observe. On the other, we learned how difficult laparoscopy really is. We experienced for ourselves how difficult it can be initially to do laparoscopy via a 2D screen. Being able to collaborate with the surgeons and receive encouragement from them made it

clear to us that surgeons all have to start from small beginnings and first acquire their expertise.

It might certainly be debated how useful it really is to take this type of course at such an early stage in medical training. However, it could equally be pointed out that the approach on which the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® was based was certainly controversial to begin with as well.

Following our own experiences, however, there is no doubt for us that the careful and long-term basic approach used by the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ®, with its Summer School module, along with the participation at the 126th Conference of the German Society for Surgery in 2009 and with completion of the laparoscopy course, has reinforced our desire to become surgeons to such an extent that it would now hardly be possible for us to lose our motivation. We are quite certain that the well thought-out way in which the theory and practice have been communicated to us will enable us to contribute better to everyday operating room work in future practical periods and during the practical year.

We would like to express our thanks to Prof. Brücher, who initiated the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® and put it into effect. He is also running an active mentoring system that covers all of the necessary professional and private topics. Additionally he is always a contact person and a critical reviewer, who always encourages us and strengthens us within our surgical career progression.

We would also like to express our warm thanks to Covidien Germany Ltd. The company has not only provided financial support to the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ®, but also sponsored this extraordinary and generous prize. Our trip to France was an extraordinary experience. As at the Theodor-Billroth-Academy ® Summer School, everything was perfectly organized. Our thanks are due particularly here to Mr. Elmar

Rübsam, Director of Covidien Germany Ltd., and Mr. Wolfgang Johannes, who despite his tremendous workload gave us a great deal of his time and made every effort to ensure that we were well integrated into the course in spite of the very early stage of our own training. Our thanks are also due of course to the course leaders, particularly Prof. Kessler, and all of the other course participants. They did not regard us as being “just” medical students, accepted us as colleagues, gave us exemplary guidance, and let us join in discussions as equals.

We are very well aware that the contributions all of these people are making cannot be taken for granted, and we would like to express our strongest gratitude to them for the unique experience we have enjoyed.

It was a very great honor for us, as participants in the first Theodor-Billroth-Academy® Summer School in 2008, to be able to take part in the Covidien Germany Ltd. Master Class course held in Elancourt in France.