

# An International Road to Surgery: An interview with Dr. Anna Riemen, BSc Hon Biochem, MbChB, MRCSEd

Wednesday, December 26, 2012

**Speciality Registrar Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery**  
**Orthopaedic Suite**  
**Woodend Hospital**  
**Eday Road**  
**Aberdeen AB15 6XS**  
**0845 456 6000**



## ***Background:***

I am currently a Speciality Registrar 3 in Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery. I am German and grew up there and moved to the UK for university. I completed a BSc with Honours in Biochemistry and then went to Dundee University Medical School. During medical school I organized placements in T&O at Charite Hospital in Berlin and at Denver Health in Denver, Colorado. My elective was in a very remote hospital in Uganda on the border to Congo. I did my two foundation doctors years in Dundee and Perth and am now in Aberdeen for my run through Orthopaedic training. I did my MRCS at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and I am involved in Medical Politics through the BMA.

## ***What motivated you to choose a career in surgery?***

I came to medicine on a slightly unconventional route for a UK graduate. I was convinced I would become a Biochemist and never thought about medicine until I spent a year at Stevens Institute of Technology. From our campus, I saw the twin towers fall. That year I felt drawn to medicine as a way to combine research and hands-on care. I finished my degree taking extra Anatomy classes and then went on to study medicine at the University of Dundee skipping 1st year. But it was only when I discovered surgery and especially Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery during an extra summer placement I had arranged in Berlin, Germany, that I really got hooked. My first day in an operating room I saw the Trauma surgeons fixing this patient who had massive life-threatening injuries from a terrible accident. I love the immediate effect. People get better quickly, I can positively influence their lives and even in a bad situation the aim is to restore function and provide freedom.

## ***How has a career in surgery met your expectations, and over the years, what advances have you seen evolve for women in surgery?***

I love it! I consider myself to still be in the early stages of my career having entered my third year of T&O speciality training. Every day I come home and feel satisfied that I have learned something new and made a difference to one of my patients or taught a student or foundation doctor. I even manage to squeeze in some medical politics and a bit of research. I have not noticed any changes

for women in surgery recently but then throughout medical school and the initial years as a doctor all the surgical attendings have encouraged and supported me. In my training programme in Aberdeen I feel well supported as a trainee, and as there are at least five other girls training to become Orthopaedic surgeons here, and we have quite a few general surgical trainees who are women, it seems normal.

***What are the challenges of being a surgeon (as women and in general)?***

The biggest challenge is yourself. You have to be self-confident and although a healthy amount of self criticism is good don't let it take over. I have noticed women are more self-critical than male surgeons. At the same time you have to live with and deal with your complications.

***What advice can you offer to women who wish to pursue a career in surgery?***

It is a hard and long training programme and you have to be committed right from the start. If you let yourself go, then at least three people are in line behind you to overtake. You have to do a lot of self study and always be prepared. It's a great career and I would not want to do anything else.

***What have you found to be beneficial, in terms of balancing professional and family obligations?***

I have been single for a long time now so maybe I am not the right person to answer this question.

I love the time I spend in surgery and I make a point of keeping in touch with close friends and my family via the phone and e-mail and at least once or twice a year I fly back to Germany to visit them.

You should always have something to balance work with. I love singing and I play the flute and clarinet when I get a spare minute. As an Orthopaedic surgeon I need to be fit so I regularly go to the gym and for a special treat I have some big power kites with which I zoom along the beach.

***What recommendations can you offer to women in surgery regarding family planning?***

Again I have not yet had the chance to have kids but one of my colleagues and inspiring women surgeons I have met on placements in the USA along the way have had kids at varying stages of their careers. It seems to me that the facilities in Scotland to be a (trainee) surgeon and have kids are good but having family nearby and a supportive partner certainly help, as do excellent friends.

***What have been the most rewarding and gratifying aspects of your surgery career?***

I love working with my hands and the tactile feedback from what I do. Using everything I learned to solve a problem. In Orthopaedics I often have clear diagnoses from history and examination and it is nice to have an x-ray or other investigation to confirm. Fixing fractures and doing joint replacements -- seeing people walk again is just amazing. I work with a variety of people; one moment I see a 100-year-old lady, next I might see a toddler followed by a 20-year-old athlete.

***Why did you join AWS?***

AWS is a group of fantastic surgeons and they give the opportunity to learn from them and to experience encouragement. I like the way they focus on education and professional support. There is no similar alternative for women surgeons in Scotland, and although all my bosses are

encouraging I have so far only met three female attending orthopaedic surgeons -- so it's nice to know there are more.

***What do you find being enjoyable as a member of AWS?***

I love hearing about others' success stories while at the same time getting guidance and encouragement on how to achieve the same.

***Why should medical students join AWS?***

Although there are more women in surgical training, still there are few female consultants surgeons. It helps to have role models and mentors. AWS has great educational resources and it is great to find like-minded people!

*This interview was conducted by Mahvesh Rana Javaid, member of the AWS Medical Student Committee in 2012.*