

Dream Jobs: Heart surgeon

By Jill Insley, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.18.16

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A heart surgeon operates. Getty

A 9-month-old baby lies on the operating table. His eyelids are taped shut and a breathing tube has been put into his nose. A line has been drawn on his chest to show the surgeon where to operate.

The boy is from Italy. He has a problem called long segment tracheal stenosis. This means that his breathing tube in his throat, called a trachea, is too narrow. The baby was born with one lung. He has been brought to Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) in London, England, to be operated on by Professor Martin Elliott. He is a surgeon that specializes in operating on children with heart and lung problems. There are only four or five teams in the world that do this type of operation.

Doctor Tense But Confident

Before the doctor operates, he said he feels "tense but confident. I'm much more anxious about public speaking — but once I get started I relax."

Elliott has been at the hospital since 7 a.m. It is now almost 10 a.m.

There are 13 people in the operating room, including two other surgeons. Elliott asks the team to be silent as he goes over the details of the operation.

The baby's windpipe is 3 mm across (one-eighth of an inch). It should be twice as wide at his age. The problem has not only hurt the baby's growth but also threatens his life.

Elliott quietly asks nurses to pass him the surgical tools, and he begins to operate to widen the trachea. He explains each move to his team as he makes it.

The operation is not easy. The trachea is about an inch-and-a-half long and about as wide as a pencil. All the surgeons wear "lupes," or special magnifying glasses.

The operation is finished and Elliott enters the details into a computer to be sent to different health centers. They will share the information, which will help to make the operation safer and better.

Elliott understands how scary the operation was for the baby's parents.

Long Training, Long Hours

Elliott works five 12-hour days every week and is called to the hospital when sick children come in with emergencies. Younger surgeons work even longer hours.

How do doctors, and their families, deal with long hours? "It's exciting for the doctor. You've got a very, very important problem to solve — a child's life to save. You go through a long training time."

Surgeons need the support of their families because the job is so difficult.

Elliott knows the long hours are necessary, but it has had a big effect on his family. His children felt sad sometimes when their father was called away to take care of another sick child.

Elliott also spends a lot of time teaching and speaking about the operation around the world. He operates in other countries when patients are too sick to travel to London.

The baby will be kept quiet for a couple of days to allow his wound to start healing, but Elliott checked on him after 24 hours and saw that he was doing just fine.

Job Stats

Hours: Doctors spend much time seeing patients and operating, and on studying and research.

Work-life balance: It is hard to keep up. Elliott says: "My difficulty is not getting surgeons to work, but making them stop."

Salary: For surgeons in Great Britain, the basic pay is about £90,200 (\$114,000). They make on average £119,800 a year (\$151,000).

Best thing: "It's never boring." There's a huge variety of work: seeing patients, research, writing and lecturing and operating all over the world.

Worst thing: When a child dies. "You can't help but feel personally responsible."

Overtime

Elliott enjoys listening to music and he likes to have classical or jazz music played in the operating room.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following are two MAIN ideas of the article?
1. *Heart surgeons can save children's lives.*
 2. *Heart surgery is a tough but rewarding job.*
 3. *Heart surgeons don't get to see their kids often.*
 4. *Heart surgeons make a lot of money compared to other people.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4
- 2 Which sentence from the article is MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) There are only four or five teams in the world that do this type of operation.
- (B) The trachea is about an inch-and-a-half long and about as wide as a pencil.
- (C) Elliott understands how scary the operation was for the baby's parents.
- (D) Surgeons need the support of their families because the job is so difficult.
- 3 According to the article, how do heart surgeons improve?
- (A) They work long hours.
- (B) They travel to other countries to do operations.
- (C) They share information and do research.
- (D) They have supportive families.
- 4 According to the article, what effect may working long hours have on a surgeon's children?
- (A) They enjoy hearing about operations.
- (B) They are supportive of the time training takes.
- (C) They are sometimes sad to have less time with their parent.
- (D) They are excited because their parent is saving children's lives.