

Michigan Surgery Sessions: Michigan Women's Surgical Collaborative – Foundation & Future

Featuring: Erin Perrone, MD; Dana Telem, MD, MPH

Narrator:

Welcome to Michigan Surgery Sessions, where we discuss the latest in clinical care, education, and surgery culture with faculty, residents, and medical students.

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, welcome everyone to another Michigan surgery session podcast. Right now, we're really excited to introduce a new series of podcast designed by the members of our Michigan Women's Surgical Collaborative, or the MWSC for short. And these are really designed to discuss the current and future topics impacting women in surgery. These series will focus on where we've come from, how we are doing in our goal to achieve equity, and where we still need to go.

The MWSC really represents a collaborative that we started back into 2016 in response to our gender achievement gap, not just nationally, but even locally at our institution. And our very intentional goal is really to drive forward to attain gender equity in academic surgery, which we try to do both through rigorous research and dissemination of best practices for the individual organizational and at the national level. I'm Dr. Dana Telem, who's had really the honor of serving as the founder and the leader of the MWSC since inception. I have recently handed the reins over to Dr. Perrone, who is with me right now co-hosting this podcast. And together, we are going to create a space to have a conversation about our collaborative, where it began, and where it's going. So, to start, I want to tell us a little bit about us. Dr. Perrone, want to say hi to everybody?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Hi.

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, Dr. Perrone, who's sitting with me right now, is a newly promoted associate professor in the section of pediatric surgery and program director of the Fetal Surgery Fellowship at the CS Mott Children's Hospital. Her clinical interests are really in prenatal counseling and fetal intervention. But I think what's most important and relevant is that she has a passion for empowering women in surgery. Outside of her involvement in MWSC, she serves as the co-chair for the inaugural women in surgery committees, both in the American Pediatric Surgery Association and the Michigan chapter of the American College of Surgeons. She's a very sought-after mentor, and I know has sponsored and been wonderful to all of our residents and learners at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Thanks so much. It's such an honor to be here today and to be leading this inaugural podcast for the MWSC. So, Dr. Telem, as many of you out there know, is the Lazar J. Greenfield Professor of Surgery, the newly appointed section chief of general surgery, and Vice Chair for Quality and Patient Safety at the University of Michigan. She has a busy clinical practice devoted to minimally invasive therapies for hernia, benign esophageal disease, and morbid obesity.

Her academic work centers on improving outcomes for preference-sensitive clinical conditions and high value care strategies. Other research interests include closing the gender achievement gap in academic surgery, where she of course founded the Michigan Women's Surgical Collaborative. She receives [inaudible 00:02:49] research funding from the AHRQ and NIH and has over 150 peer reviewed publications of book chapters. Let me repeat that, 150. I have some big shoes to fill.

She's an associate editor for Surgery for Obesity and Related Diseases, Surgical Endoscopy, American Journal of Surgery, and Hernia, and on the editorial board of The Annals of Surgery. She holds many other key leadership portions of clinical organizations and professional societies, but we want to get started today with the rest of the talk.

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, thank you so much for that very, very kind introduction. I very much appreciate it.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Dr. Telem, can you tell me what prompted the creation of the Michigan Women's Surgical Collaborative when you came to Michigan medicine, the department of surgery in 2016?

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, thanks so much for the question. And I think that's sort of the crux about why we're here today and sort of the areas we're thinking of. I had the pleasure of being recruited here almost five years ago now. And when I came here, it was really in that sort of tenuous assistant to associate level, associate kind of early career, figuring out what wanted to do. And it became sort of glaringly apparent, both at a national/local level, who are our mentors, who are our role models, kind of what was going on, and sort of the drop off in whatever you'd call sort of a ceiling in that level, and sort of some of the different areas that contributed.

And when I came here, it was kind of serendipity in many ways. I think there was a very intentional effort by the department because they recognized this gap and wanted to do something about it, and found an amazing cohort of other women who are in similar positions, starting off as early newly minted associate professors and trying to figure out the roadmap and the blueprint. And we came together and essentially founded this organization to not just help ourselves and help our institution, but scale what we could learn to others.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Wow. Yeah, that sounds like a tall order. Can you tell me which women you recruited to this initiative and this collaborative? And was everyone a surgeon? Was it only department of surgery? How did you go about that?

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, it started in the department of surgery, and I think it was just a little bit of serendipity. We have since grown so much in the department, but there weren't a ton of us first when we had just started here. And I was very fortunate to become friends rather rapidly with Erica Newman and Jen [inaudible 00:05:18], who's a plastic surgeon. Erica, as you know, is one of your partners in pediatric surgery. As well as Don Coleman, who is a vascular surgeon. [inaudible 00:05:27], who's actually not a surgeon, but our education specialist within the department. And Janet Dombrowski, who's been just doing phenomenal work with a lot of the coaching and other initiatives.

And together, this all just started sort of as a conversation that we were having sort of around what are the different challenges that we were finding and where are the different areas that we wanted to go. And this is just what produced out of it. And now, as you know taking over, we've pretty much expanded to include not just people within the department, but outside of the department of surgery as well, Kate Kraft from urology and others who are joining us. So really excited to see how you're going to continue to scale this and include others.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Yeah, I love how organic it seems to have come up, given the intentionality, it still seemed to transition very naturally. So, what was the turnout for the symposiums that you had? I know that MWSC is now recognized nationally, and women came from all around the country, at least to the ones that I was at. But can you tell me about the success and how you got there?

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, I think that was really interesting because one of the things that we had discussed as a group is we didn't want to repeat things. We really wanted to understand what is different, what is missing, what don't we need. And when we started looking around and thinking about creating a conference and creating something with impact and meaning to others, we kind of asked ourselves, "What's the gap?" And what we found was there was a lot of programming for medical students, a lot of programming for residents, a lot programming for early career faculty, but there was really sort of a paucity of opportunities for people transitioning into the mid-career, talking about things that you don't think about in your first job, things like how do you renegotiate a contract? How do you get promoted beyond the associate professor level? How do you advance within your own organization? How do you know when it's time to say when? How do you develop leadership skills?

And that is sort of what fueled the conferences. And we made sure to have a very diverse panel of initially female speakers to really kind of show different paths to success, different personalities, different phenotypes, and kind of serve as sort of role modeling. And then also make sure each conference, everybody took away something. And that's where sort of Janet Dombrowski came in and created sort of coaching opportunities or scaled coaching interventions so people could go home. One of our conferences really centered on figuring out what's your why, the Simon Sinek model of what's your why and how do you expand your why and how does that influence your whole year? We've given people diaries and journals to kind of think about how do you translate a lot of the information that you're going.

And I think that's why they've been so successful is because we're trying to sort of address a niche population. We've historically always capped at 150 to keep it smaller and to make sure that people have that networking and sort of more intimate type of experience where they can really get to know. And to me, one of the greatest things that have come out of it is sort of the relationships that have built

from those conferences, which have been wonderful. Obviously with COVID and the pandemic, that's shut down a bit. We've done a couple webinar series that I have been highly impactful, but still misses that kind of secret sauce of being in person. So, look forward to when hopefully you're going to run our meeting in person in 2022.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Have you seen any measurable differences that you attribute to the MWSC?

Dr. Dana Telem:

I think so. But I think sometimes it's hard to also divorce these things from secular trends. We've had so many intentional efforts in the department, and this is just sort of one piece of that larger initiative of the Michigan Promise, which is really meant to develop all persons in the phenotype they want to be. I'd like to think that we've empowered people both here, and what I'd really hope is that we've scaled this nationally and given persons who maybe don't have the same resources that we have here an opportunity to learn and gain skills that they can apply at their own institutions. And my favorite thing is getting calls or emails from people telling me the things that they learned and how they've translated. Or alternatively, when people keep coming back year after year, and I'm like, "Didn't you see this last year?" And they're like, "We can't get enough of it. And we kind of want to come here and do this." And I think that that's been really great.

And I hope that this continues to sort of serve that role and help persons that historically maybe... I think sometimes, again, that there's this false notion that once you hit associate, you know what you're doing and you're going forward and everything's going to be great. And I look forward to continuing trying to figure out how do we remove some of the barriers and ceilings that are a little bit unique to some of these mid-career or even later career transitions and creating networks for people at that level.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Yeah, absolutely. It certainly has been a learning experience for me.

Dr. Dana Telem:

So, I think I've talked enough. So, I think it's time for me to ask you some questions, Dr. Perrone. And what I'd like to ask you is what has it meant to you first when we brought you on as a participant, I think two years into the effort, based on your phenomenal work and leadership qualities and your commitment to mentorship, and then as a member of our planning team?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

The MWSC has really been a place of learning and growth for me. First, I just attended the conference and I learned so much. I recognized it was the first place I realized I wasn't the only one battling what felt like a very steep uphill. I came here, I was first just struggling to bring my best self to work every day as a new faculty at a new institution, not knowing people. I also was trying to develop a research career and figure out and navigate how to do that. And lastly, of course, I was trying to balance work and family and home life and how I was going to continue this hopefully very long career and stay sane during it.

I learned about negotiating my worth, something I had never even thought about. But I learned that my male colleagues do very well. And I learned about developing an elevator pitch, which if you haven't done it, it's just a 30 second snippet of if you were to run into that CEO in the hospital and they said,

"Hey, how you doing? What's going on?" how you can give your best self. All of those things were very new to me. And it was just something that I hadn't even really thought of. But we got to practice together with other women surgeons and was coached through with Janet, which was just really a growth exercise for me. So, these are all new skills that I loved and learned from. And I just wanted to, like you said, keep coming back for more.

Dr. Dana Telem:

I'm so happy to hear that. And I think when you hear the impact that has even... I think even this is some of the first time I think you've told me directly some of the impact that that's had and how that's kind of changed your practice. It's really meaningful to hear. And that elevator pitch, that was the best advice that you could have gotten because everybody should have their two-sentence thing that you can say that you need when you see someone. So, I guess the biggest question that I have for you now that you're taking over this is what is your vision? Where do you see this evolving or scaling in the next couple years?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Yeah. So, I have some very big shoes to fill. This has been really impactful. And like you said, you've taken it outside of just even the local level to the national level. I've talked with people around the country who are interested in developing it in their own institution and come specifically for this. And I really appreciate that you're staying on the team because I'm going to keep having you provide guidance and expertise. But for me, the MWSC has really given me insight into how I think, feel, and interact as a surgeon and how it's different from my male colleagues. But it's different, but not in a bad way, just in a unique, different way. It's given me the courage to embrace my strengths, understand and learn from my weaknesses, and see that I don't need to walk the same path as those before me, but I can create my own path to success. And my hope is that the MWSC can do that for others.

I think truly the future of surgery will go beyond excellent patient care. I think we will move into the social justice and advocacy realms. And I think there are things that can affect our patients that are outside of our immediate control as surgeons. But as a group, we're pretty strong. Collectively, we're powerful, innovative, and we can fight for our patients in realms outside of the operating room. So, hopefully we can start standing up against injustices and advocate in new ways for our patients.

Dr. Dana Telem:

That sounds amazing. So, you mentioned that people are looking to start similar things at other institutions. How do you think that will play and do you think this is something that we can sort of scale across individual institutions, that you want to see branches of? Or how does that look?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Yeah, I do. I think that we've really built some... We have some good toolkits here and some building blocks, and we can help advise other places about how to do that. And I'm very open to talking with other places and other institutions that want to do this. Hopefully, they'll come, and they'll interact with us for one or two of ours. But certainly, I think we can give the toolkits to other institutions, because really, we'd love to scale this nationally and have this be the regular at all the different departments of surgery around the country.

Dr. Dana Telem:

And not to celebrate you more, but I know you just took on a vice chair role, is that right?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

I did.

Dr. Dana Telem:

And would you want to tell a little bit about that vice chair role?

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Sure. So, I'm taking on the Vice Chair for Faculty Life the department of surgery at Michigan Medicine. And that's part of the Michigan Promise as well. And one of the two leaders of that, along with the rest of the amazing people who are all the different subcommittees. But one of my goals will really be focusing on environment and making sure that we have a strong culture of inclusivity and allowing everybody to be their best selves.

Dr. Dana Telem:

Yeah. And I was so excited when you took on that role because I think there's so much synergy between the two. And I look forward to you hopefully using that to leverage to help people both here as well as at other institutions with a lot of the toolkits that you said we've developed here that can be broadly applied.

Dr. Erin Perrone:

Absolutely. That's the goal. Well, thank you everybody. You have been listening to the Michigan Women's Surgical Collaborative podcast as part of the Michigan Surgery Sessions. Thank you for tuning in.

Dr. Dana Telem:

Thanks for tuning in, and be on the lookout for our other podcasts on current and future issues affecting women in surgery.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to the Michigan surgery sessions podcast. To learn more about the department of surgery at Michigan Medicine, our people, and our programs, and to find more podcasts, visit our website at medicine.umich.edu/dept/surgery.