

Using Syndicom SpineConnect to enhance and support the Fellowship experience

The UCLA Department of Orthopaedic Surgery Spine Fellowship is a comprehensive program that offers clinical and research opportunities in all aspects of spinal disease. Dr. Jeffrey C. Wang, Chief of the UCLA Spine Service and Director of the UCLA Spine Surgery Fellowship, identified an opportunity to use SpineConnect's collaborative community as a way to enhance the learning experience of his fellows, and to provide an environment for ongoing real-time communication among UCLA Spine Fellowship alumni.

Situation

The UCLA Spine Surgery Fellowship is one of the leading spine fellowship programs in the country. Led by Jeffrey C. Wang, Chief of the UCLA Spine Service, fellows participate in all areas of clinical spine including cervical, thoracic, lumbar and degenerative and deformity diagnoses. The fellowship entails the use of all types of current instrumentation and surgical techniques and fellows can participate in any number of basic science research projects. The day-to-day responsibilities of the fellow include clinical patient care, and extensive participation in surgical cases as well as in the Clinic. S/he is responsible for running the UCLA Spine Service and incorporating participating residents, as well as helping to organize the weekly Spine Conference held jointly with the Department of Neurosurgery.

There are more than eighty spinal surgery fellowships in the US which offer a wide variation in terms of surgical experience, diversity of exposure to the various components of spinal disorders, facility support and research opportunities. Each spinal fellowship program has a particular emphasis based on the expertise of the teaching faculty and no program is able to provide maximum experience in every component of spinal disease. Program emphasis varies widely and may be on degenerative conditions, deformity, trauma, reconstructive, non-operative care, pediatric or adult. At the UCLA Spine Surgery Fellowship, about 40% of the cases a fellow will encounter are in the cervical area, and nearly 50% of the patient cases are degenerative in nature.

"We needed a way to expose our fellows not only to surgeries that we don't typically encounter here at UCLA, but also to different methods and technologies," said Wang. "Fellowship programs are ultimately driven by a faculty's training, location, and experience."

After the completion of medical training, many fellows embark upon the initial phase of their professional career: joining a private practice or institutional setting. For some fellows, they have the additional challenge of establishing their own medical practices. After years of clinical training with very limited "real world" exposure, these fellows are suddenly confronted by the stark reality of handling patient cases on their own.

In previous years, fellows would send their cases to Wang for his review, seeking his advice as a mentor. These discussions took place over email, via phone, or even by fax – a time consuming process. "Tracking down a spine surgeon can be a very frustrating experience because we are so busy. We're either making rounds, in surgery, or involved in some research related activity."

What the UCLA Spine Fellowship Program needed was a collaborative platform where the faculty could share their knowledge, insights, and experiences on complex cases that their former fellows were now encountering on their own for the first time. Continues Wang, "With a robust collaboration environment, I knew we could offer our fellows a way to interact with us for real-time input and exchange of ideas. This in turn would foster a more participative and interactive learning environment. It would be a way we could stay connected as a community even if we were located halfway around the world."

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Solution

Wang was already familiar with the SpineConnect platform from personal experience, and recognized its value in a fellowship environment. “The cases being discussed on SpineConnect are the really interesting, complex cases. It has become a great source for ‘teaching cases’ in our fellowship program – particularly at the weekly spine conference. All I need to do is connect to the internet, and it’s literally like having a cutting-edge journal at my fingertips. Our fellows have embraced SpineConnect as a great educational learning tool.”

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Jeffery Wang, MD
Chief of the UCLA Spine Service

Once the fellows leave UCLA, the real power of SpineConnect is recognized. Continues Wang, “SpineConnect allowed us to effectively organize and quickly communicate our cases within our larger network of former residents and fellows. Our UCLA SpineConnect community now contributes an average of six opinions per case - often within 24 hours. To walk into surgery with this much knowledge from your peers is invaluable.”

Using SpineConnect has also resulted in some unanticipated benefits for the UCLA Comprehensive Spine Center. Because of the collaborative nature of the group, not only have difficult and unusual cases been resolved, but also research initiatives, publishing opportunities, and knowledge sharing outside of cases have become more common. In effect, SpineConnect has reinforced the bonds shared between the members of the UCLA group resulting in more effective communication, collaboration, and ultimately better patient care.

Benefits

The UCLA Department of Orthopaedic Surgery has leveraged the SpineConnect platform to create a valuable tool for their spine fellowship. Not only is it delivering educational value, but it also provides a rich collaborative environment to support newly graduated fellows from the UCLA program.

Provides a source for teaching cases

UCLA is able pull “teaching cases” directly from the SpineConnect case knowledgebase. With over 800 cases and an easy-to-use search engine, Fellowship Directors can select a particular spine condition and pull up real cases with diagnostics, case history, valuable surgeon comments, and in many cases, the follow-up. All this information provides a rich learning experience for fellows.

Enables faculty to help newly trained spine surgeons

SpineConnect enables former fellows to retain a link with their mentor, the Fellowship Director. The ability to share a complex case with their mentor, and gain their insight, experience, and knowledge is immeasurable not only in terms of gained confidence, but also improved patient outcomes.

Fosters a true sense of community

SpineConnect’s architecture supports distinct communities within the context of the larger SpineConnect community. UCLA has its own group comprised of former and current fellows, in addition to faculty. Members are able to interact and communicate on a daily basis within a group setting fostering a sense of belonging and trust.

For More Information

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