

Dear Dr Jay Wiper and Dr Michael Wagels,

I am writing to express my strong interest in the Microsurgery Fellowship position at Princess Alexandra Hospital. As a highly skilled recent plastic and reconstructive surgery graduate with more than three years of experience at Russia's top medical university, I am confident that my exposure to complex sub-specialities, including microsurgery, head and neck, and breast surgery, will be a valuable addition to your team.

To tell you a little bit about myself, I come from a multi-national background. I was born in Damascus, Syria, but raised in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia since infancy. My father dedicated his life to working in Saudi Arabia as an orthopaedic registrar to provide a better life for us than we could have had in Syria. He put us in the best schools and made sure we received the best education. However, living in Saudi back in the day was much more difficult for a woman than it is now. Women couldn't drive and had fewer rights than they currently do, so that limited my exposure to the world. I experienced my own personal COVID-19 lockdown until I was 18 years old. I had already graduated high school with honours, and it was time to decide where I should pursue my education next. I couldn't go back to Syria because the war had just broken out in the country. Why not Saudi Arabia then? Well, foreigners didn't have the right to attend public medical universities. Although I received a scholarship to the finest private medical university in Saudi, we still had to pay fees out of our capacity.

My uncle, who lived in Ukraine at the time, suggested that I could continue my education where he was staying so that my transition from lockdown to the real world would be easier. He told us that I could get a medical education in English, and so, to Ukraine I went. From there, I experienced a major cultural shock. Not only did I have to get used to a foreign Russian teaching style (as opposed to the British/American curriculum I was accustomed to), but my eyes were finally open to the real world. It was the first time I could go outside and walk alone, use public transport, and talk to people from different sexes. Our university grouped foreigners together to ensure seamless integration into the Ukrainian culture, so I had my courses with Indians and Africans. I lived in a hostel with roommates, tried Indian and African cuisine, and even learned Hindi well before I could get a grasp on Russian! It felt like I was getting a crash course on life.

Throughout my education, it was clearer and clearer that I wanted to pursue a career in surgery. Facial transplants fascinated me and they are still a major driver in the progression of my career and a key reason why I chose my specialty. I found myself gravitating towards maxillofacial and ENT surgeries, but I also yearned for the ability to operate on the entire body. After weighing out these factors in my senior year, I knew that plastic surgery was for me. I enrolled in Russia's top plastic surgery program at Sechenov University, and from there, my life changed yet again.

The difficulties were of another calibre, as surgery is no easy feat. Furthermore, I had asked to be involved with the Head and Neck team right from the start. I was assigned to the Head of the Oncology and Plastic Surgery Department, a pioneer in oncoplastic surgeries in Russia, who is also my current supervisor and who believed in me and supported me throughout my career. With him and his team, we performed a vast array of plastic and reconstructive surgeries and I was exposed to a wide selection of flaps and microsurgical procedures. We did reconstructions with anterolateral thigh flaps, greater omentum flaps, radial forearm free flaps, DIEP flaps, and DCIA bone flaps, to name only a few.

As a university hospital, we strive to pioneer scientific development and maintain quality assurance programs. Our department engages in several surgical research projects, and we use evidence-based protocols to improve our quality of care. We change patients' lives and give them hope and a chance for a new beginning. One distinct case is that of a girl who had lost her entire face after being attacked by stray dogs. She was found on the ground on the street and thought to be dead until she suddenly showed signs of life and was immediately transported to intensive care. After she was stabilized our department gave her a chance for a new face after she underwent several reconstructive procedures. These examples reinforce my passion for my career and spark a little light in my heart that helps me progress.

Through years of diligent work and collaboration with senior registrars and attending physicians, I have honed my skills to a level where my supervisors and patients alike trust me to deliver outstanding results. I am confident in my ability to meet any challenge that comes my way. My passion extends beyond the operating room, however, as I am deeply committed to teaching and research. Recognizing my dedication and skills, my previous supervisor entrusted me with a role on the editorial board of the Journal of Biomedical Reports, ensuring that all scientific reporting meets the highest standards of quality. Additionally, I use my bilingual proficiency to translate articles between English and Russian, broadening the dissemination of research findings. My exceptional teaching skills did not go unnoticed, as my current supervisors appointed me as the only foreign member in our department to assist other international medical students and residents. I am now responsible for teaching groups of medical students and surgical residents about the nuances of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

I have pushed myself one step further and enrolled in a clinical PhD program where I am researching the use of Indocyanine Green (ICG) fluorescence in breast cancer patients. However, we faced some obstacles in the process. I consulted with the head doctor of the radiotherapy department, an expert in photodynamic therapy. He informed me that our hospital had access to MARS, a new and highly advanced near-infrared fluorescence camera. This camera is essential to my study, but the challenge we faced was no one knew how to use it. I took advantage and saw this as an opportunity to improve my skills and learn how to operate MARS and use ICG fluorescence. As a result, I became the only professional in the hospital with this rare skill. Various specialists from different departments started seeking my assistance during their surgeries. Thanks to my abilities, we can now use ICG to identify sentinel lymph nodes in breast cancer patients, which significantly reduces postoperative complications. We have also started using it in cases of melanoma, as well as in abdominal surgery. By using ICG, we can now locate sentinel lymph nodes or check for revascularization.

You see, the setting of my work at the university hospital provided the necessary infrastructure for my role as a plastic surgeon. Throughout my training, I learned to adapt to various complex medical situations. I take personal responsibility for my patients' well-being and work tirelessly to ensure they receive the highest level of care. Moving forward, I plan to improve my skills and techniques and become a well-rounded plastic surgeon with a focus on the Head and Neck and Breast. I chose Princess Alexandra Hospital as I will relocate to Brisbane and live there for a few years with my fiancée, a PhD researcher in Medical AI at the University of Queensland.

Because I have an international background, one of my goals is to be able to operate around the world. I come from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, and Russia, and I desire to become one of the very few female surgeons capable of performing complex procedures and making a positive impact on society. I want to acquire the skillset to teach and mentor the next generation of surgeons, and to be a helping hand that improves medical care. My dream is to be able to do pro bono surgeries for people in need in Syria and Ukraine. I want to give those who have lost their face a fighting chance. This position is a crucial step in my career, as it will allow me to expand my clinical expertise and make meaningful contributions to your hospital. I want to develop my abilities in microsurgical operations and introduce these innovations to different parts of the world.

As a plastic surgeon, I always put my patients at the centre of my approach. I believe in a multidisciplinary framework that fosters research and innovation to help shape the future of my field and push boundaries. My dedication to excellence and patient care is reflected in my medical practice. With my extensive clinical background and current PhD research on breast cancer, I offer a unique blend of clinical expertise and research acumen that aligns with your hospital's commitment to excellence and patient care.

To ensure a seamless transition, I have taken the time to learn about the local medical practices and prioritize patient safety and comfort. Thank you for taking the time to go through my application, and I am eager to discuss how I can contribute to your team.

My sincerest regards,

Dr. Feryal Kurdi

*Dr. Kurdi Feryal*