

UBC Reticulum: A novel website connecting general surgeons in BC during the COVID-19 crisis

The UBC Reticulum website was launched in May 2019 to help connect general surgeons throughout the province. Following the emergence of COVID-19, the website has become a communication hub connecting surgeons during the crisis.

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The UBC Reticulum website was launched in May 2019 to help connect general surgeons across British Columbia. The site's primary function was to connect surgeons based on their name, location, specialty area, and the procedures they carry out. Figures 1 and 2 show screenshots of the website's map function that displays where surgeons are located throughout the province. Other features included matching surgeons with mentors, a repository of proposed and completed research projects, a locum-matching function, and a message board dubbed "Netter." The site (www.ubcreticulum.com) is restricted to general surgeons, residents, and associated administrators and researchers.

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The initiative was funded by the University of British Columbia, and the site was created by Actualize8, a website design company in Vancouver. Inspired by social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and websites

such as Airbnb and MLS, UBC Reticulum uses tags to tailor the site to a user's interests. Users identify subspecialties and other interests, and corresponding tags were created to attach to applicable research projects and message posts. Users who list specific interests on their profile receive an email or text notification when another user posts something tagged with that interest. Examples of tags include subspecialty interests such as community surgery, colorectal surgery, gastric oncology, and critical care. Examples of other interests include billing, global health, medicolegal issues, wellness, medical education, and telehealth.

Netter topics include links to other websites, billing tips, resources for telehealth, information to share with patients, endoscopy algorithms, COVID-19 data resources, announcements about canceled conferences, government tax information, wellness resources, perioperative PPE protocols, alternative sourcing of PPE, advice on triaging office consults, impacts on residents and qualifying examinations, and invitations to webinars. **Figure 3** shows a screenshot of a feeder post and a few comments on the

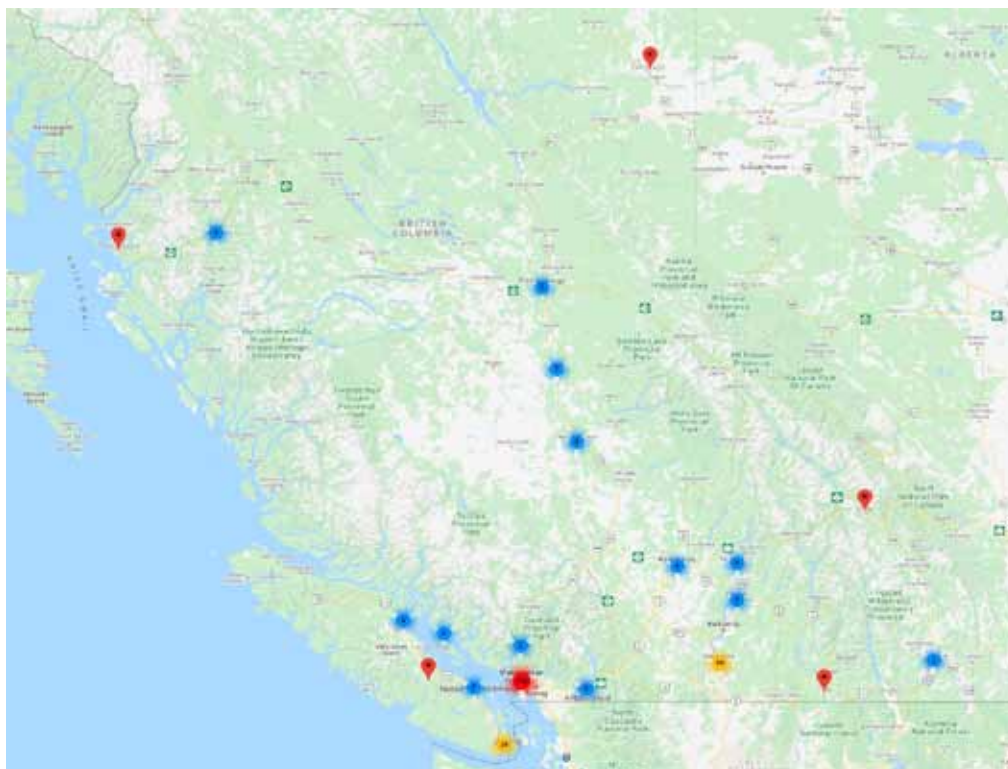


FIGURE 1. The map function of the UBC Reticulum website showing where surgeons are located throughout the province.

message board (user identifiers are greyed out).

On 15 March 2020, a COVID-19 tag was created. By 25 March 2020 there were 31 feeder posts on Netter with 63 follow-up comments posted by 24 users from all five geographic regions of the province. After 10 days, more surgeons were engaged on the website than previously seen on any other topic. Over the following 4 weeks, there were 60 additional Netter posts, including a link to a daily Zoom update hosted by surgeons at Vancouver General Hospital and attended by surgeons across the province. An additional 40 users signed up for the website, bringing the total to 232.

On 6 April 2020, a new feature went live—the COVID-19 Surgical Oncology Transfer Network. This feature, pictured in **Figure 4**, allows an at-a-glance view of all the hospitals in the province and their capacity to perform urgent cancer surgery. Each site has a designated surgeon contact to facilitate urgent transfers of cancer patients; if cancer operations become no longer possible at one hospital patients could be transferred to another hospital in the network that still has access. The network is maintained by a volunteer UBC medical student.

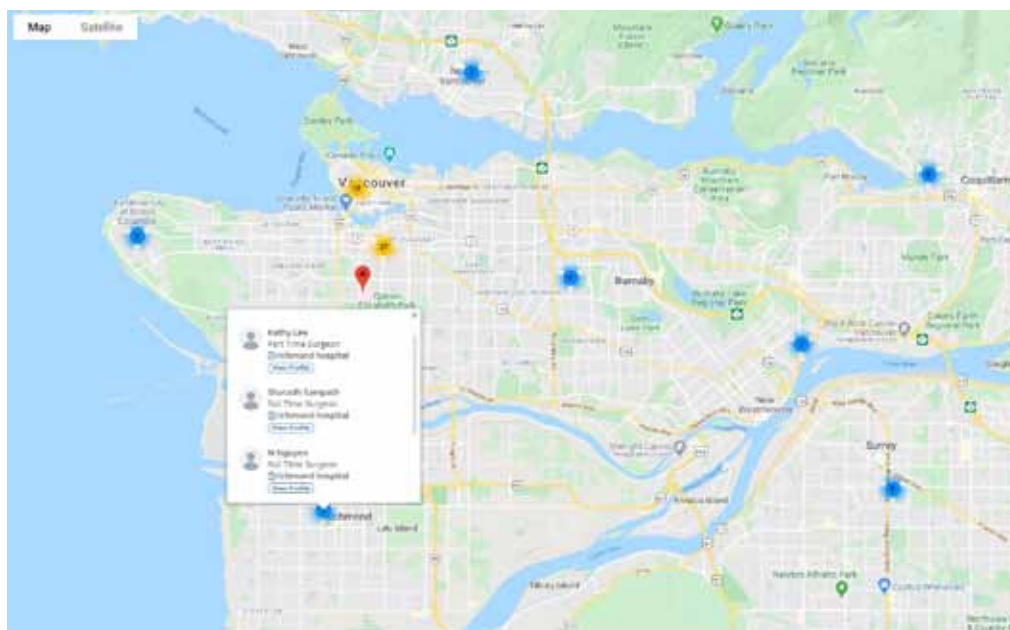


FIGURE 2. The map function showing general surgeons in Greater Vancouver.

In the face of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis, general surgeons in BC have been able to use this new technology to connect and help each other in real time in a way never before seen. The potential for collaboration created by

a networking website such as this was realized in an unpredictable circumstance. Opportunities to repurpose the network for other pandemics or disaster scenarios in the future are sure to be discovered. ■



FIGURE 3. A screenshot of a feeder post on the message board (Netter).

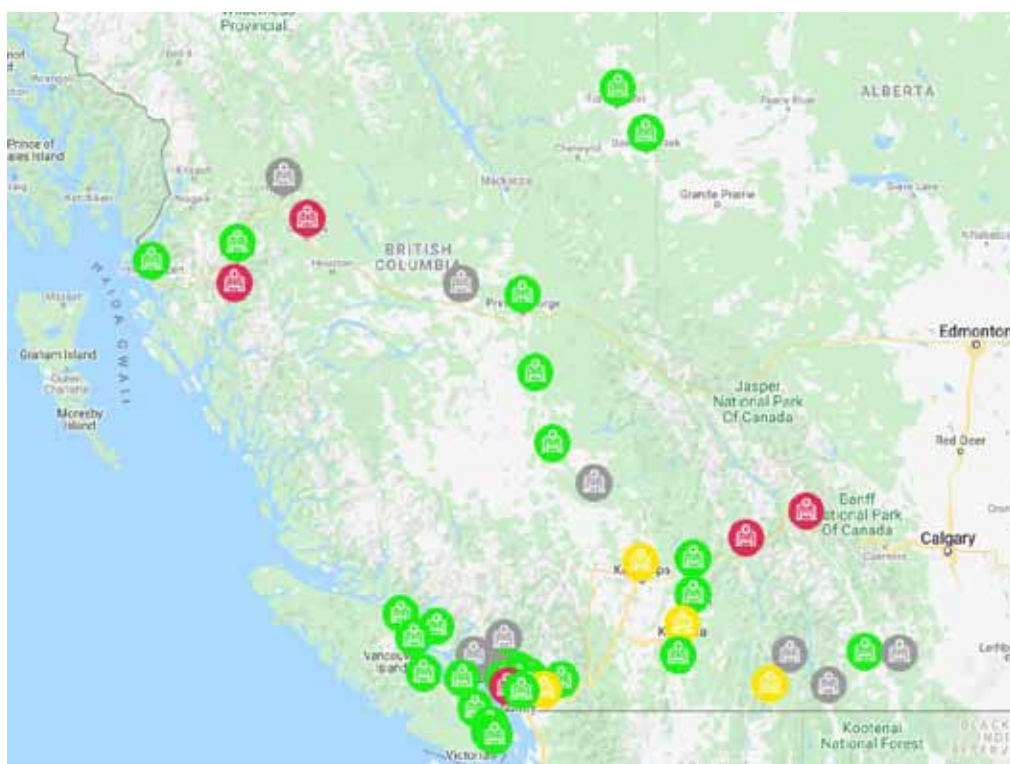


FIGURE 4. A screenshot of the COVID-19 Surgical Oncology Transfer Network.