Why Surgical Instruments Are The Way They Are

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There's a reason for the cliche — surgeon barks out the name of an instrument, scrub nurse whacks it into the hand. The reason is this: when you are focused on a particular area — especially if it's one in which danger lies — you don't want to look away. If you need to change instruments you lay down the one you're using, open your hand toward the scrub while keeping your eyes on the object of your effort, and want that new tool placed quickly and firmly. So you know where it is without having to fumble. So you can feel it through your glove which, when your palm is open, makes a little trampoline between the bases of your thumb and pinkie. Mobilizing the sigmoid colon from its attachments along the left side of the pelvis is one of those areas. Behind the sigmoid colon passes the left ureter (the tube carrying urine from the kidney to the bladder); causing it harm while working on the colon is a major transgression. Unless the area is distorted by infection or tumor, avoiding the ureter usually isn't difficult.

I'm standing to the patient's right, turned slightly footward, affording me better access to the left side of the abdomen. With my left hand I grasp the mid-portion of the sigmoid colon and pull it gently but firmly toward me, exposing the lateral mesentery. "Long Metz," I say (it's more of a request than a bark), and feel a smart snap into my hand. I love it. Some scrubs seem a bit reluctant really to whack it in, but I don't know any surgeon who doesn't appreciate that crackle, the absence of which means fumbling around to figure where the business parts are.

"Nice," I acknowledge with a masked smile. "Old school. I want you on all my cases."

Worse is bringing the instrument into view ready to cut, and finding it's been handed backwards, with the curve of the blades opposite to the curve of my fingers. (Most surgical instruments are curved, making them an extension of the hand, conferring versatility. The default direction is that the tip continues the curve of one's hand. Sometimes I want it backwards; but only if I say so.)

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