Erik Erikson (1902–1994) was a German born American developmental psychologist best known for his description of developmental stages in adulthood. Unlike many of his peers (most notably Sigmund Freud), Erikson believed that all of life, including adulthood, involved forward motion and growth.

The stages described by Erikson were later modified by George E. Valliant in his analysis of the Harvard Grant Project—a 75 year longitudinal study of adult men that started with Harvard undergraduates in 1938. The stages described by Erikson and Valliant are remarkably similar to the life and maturation of a surgeon after completion of the RACS.

Identity – Post fellowship training in a series of new environments that lead to the development of the young surgeon’s professional personality

Intimacy – The development of new relationships with others in an interdependent and committed fashion, be they peers in public or private practice, hospitals and their staff members and of course patients and their families

Career consolidation – The bulk of one’s career providing surgical services in a stable, satisfying and productive environment

Generativity – Fostering and guiding the next generation of surgeons to their own independence

Guardianship (legacy) – The taking of responsibility for the cultural values of the profession from which we all benefit

Integrity – In readiness for retirement, a coming to terms with one’s achievements and disappointment

This paper uses these stages to explore the career-long maturation of a surgeon in contemporary Australia and New Zealand, focussing in particular on the importance of legacy and the challenges of career integrity as the end of career approaches.