

New Insights Into the Dermatology Residency Application Process Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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PRACTICE POINTS

- We propose that the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic should serve as a call to action for dermatology to update and promote a more equitable, time-effective, and cost-efficient residency interview process.
- A limitation on the number of applications per candidate may lower expenses and allow for a more holistic review process by residency programs.
- The benefits and challenges of videoconferencing interviews must be weighed as residency programs decide on their continued use beyond this application cycle.

Residency application is an arduous experience for many medical students. The National Resident Matching Program reported that US medical school seniors who matched into dermatology applied to a median of 90 programs and attended 9 interviews in 2019.¹ High application and interview travel costs are a disadvantage for applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We propose that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic should serve as a call to action for dermatology to update and promote a more equitable, time-effective, and cost-efficient residency interview process.

In light of COVID-19, dermatology residency program directors have recommended a holistic application review process, taking into consideration “disparities in strength of applications due to lack of opportunity for students with smaller home programs or in areas more affected by this crisis.”² However, in a 2018 survey of 180 dermatology faculty members, 80% stated that time spent reviewing residency applications was already excessive.³ The Association of American Medical Colleges reported that for medical student applicants

with US Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 scores lower than 237 or higher than 251, the value added by submitting one additional application beyond means of 43 (95% confidence interval [CI], 34-53) and 34 (95% CI, 28-41), respectively, is reduced relative to the value added by each application before reaching the point of diminishing returns.⁴ Therefore, we suggest limiting the number of applications per applicant to the upper bounds of the CI for the lower US Medical Licensing Examination Step 1 score (53), facilitating a more detailed review of fewer applications by each program and limiting student expenses.

On May 7, 2020, the Association of American Medical Colleges made a statement strongly encouraging medical school and teaching hospital faculty to conduct interviews through videoconferencing.⁵ Videoconferencing interviews (VCIs) minimize travel-associated health risks, providing a more equitable structure for applicants and programs in areas disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. In the 2018 survey of dermatology faculty members, only 11% believed that applicants interviewing virtually received equal consideration to those interviewing in person; a solution to this problem would be to mandate that all applicants use VCIs during the COVID-19 pandemic.³ This coming year, residency programs may elect to replace in-person interviews with VCIs, or they may utilize VCIs as screening tools to narrow down the applicant pool and for students to rank their preferred programs prior to an in-person interview. By inviting fewer applicants for in-person interviews, travel-associated health risks, financial costs, and missed educational activities would be minimized. Given that many medical students have had academic activities cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19, student opportunities for live clinical experiences should be maximized.

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As programs plan for future application cycles beyond COVID-19, they must work to balance competing interests. Videoconferencing interviews allow for improved access to interviewing for applicants of lower socioeconomic classes, improved geographic mobility of applicants, and increased flexibility in accommodating faculty schedules with reduced time away from patient care and research; however, with VCIs one may lose the personal element that comes from the in-person interview, including interactions among applicants, faculty, current residents, and staff on the day of interview, as well as the departmental tour. Additionally, the quality of VCIs may be diminished by technical difficulties and the possibility of distractions, making standardization of the interview experience for applicants challenging.

The COVID-19 pandemic will surely leave its mark on the residency application cycle. We must take time now to collaborate and brainstorm creative solutions to maximize the equity and efficiency of the application process for both residency programs and students. We welcome reader feedback on these ideas and other possible solutions in the form of Letters to the Editor.

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