

Perspective

Obtaining residency in the united states: my experience

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Until recently, the United States was the premier destination for Pakistani physicians wishing to go abroad for postgraduate training. The events of 9/11, and subsequent circumstances, have led to an atmosphere that can be described as best unfavorable. Some of the major obstacles that have arisen are increased competition for residency positions, visa requirements, and security clearances. Nevertheless, doctors from Pakistan continue to obtain and excel in postgraduate positions. I have recently undertaken the complete process, and will try to explain it in a manner that will hopefully benefit other physicians.

PREREQUISITES – STARTING UP

The first requirement of an individual wishing to train in the U.S. is Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) certification. To be certified, one must successfully pass Step 1 (Basic Sciences), Step 2 (Clinical Knowledge and Skills), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The formerly known CSA is now part of Step 2. I spent 12 months undergoing independent study for the USMLE Steps. I decided to forego my house job training, based on information provided to me by previous graduates. After the interview process, I do not believe that this was detrimental to my job prospects. The two major decisions that each graduating physician needs to resolve are 1) whether to complete a house job; 2) how much time to dedicate to USMLE preparation. Once one is certified, he/she must register with the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) and the National Residency Matching Program (NRMP). ERAS is a website that allows one to enter all relevant information, including biographical information and work experience, and NRMP enables one to be part of the “Match.”

POST-CERTIFICATION

Since the competition has increased, most programs have "cutoff" scores for interview invitations, which may range from pass/pass to 85/85. Personally, I think one should have at least 85/85 to be competitive as an international medical graduate (IMG), irrespective of which specialty one desires. It is important to know that not all programs have cutoffs, and even the ones that do may be flexible depending on the remainder of your application. In my experience, the factors that matter most after scores are U.S letters of recommendation (LOR), U.S. experience (electives/observerships), and research experience. My research experience and subsequent publications were consistently asked about during interviews, and provided a good starting point for the interviewer. In addition, the personal statement should not be underestimated. It should be written early, and then proofread by someone familiar with the process. One must thoroughly research all programs and their requirements before applying to

see if the application will be competitive. For example, sending an application to Yale with scores of 75/75 would simply be a waste of money, as would an application to a West Coast program, where IMGs are generally not considered.

After the application is completed, one may apply to all programs in any specialty. I applied to 50 programs in internal medicine. Fifty is an arbitrary number; needless to say, the more programs applied to, the higher the chances of an interview call. Out of 50, I received 12 interview calls. It has been said that if one gets 10 or more interviews, the chances of a successful match are high. However, there is no statistical data to confirm this. Out of 12, I attended 10, the majority of which were in the New York/New Jersey area. After the interviews, one must "rank" the programs in NRMP. The "Match" is announced in mid-March. I successfully matched at my first choice, which was University of Illinois.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES

As IMGs, it is imperative that we distinguish ourselves from the rest of the pack, both against American graduates and other IMGs. One can accomplish this best, I feel, by 1) doing an elective in the U.S., and getting a good LOR; 2) doing research in the U.S., and getting published; and 3) doing research in Pakistan. There has been much discussion lately of "observerships;" these are only useful if one is trying to get a position at that particular institution. In addition, the sooner one reaches the U.S. the better, so that one may acclimatize adequately before interviews.

The road to residency is difficult, grueling, and strenuous. One will be challenged to the maximum, both by the process and naysayers. But it has been done, is being done, and will continue to be done. In closing, one may want to keep in mind a statement from Abraham Lincoln:

"Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing." Good luck!

USEFUL LINKS

www.usmle.org

www.ecfm.org

www.nrmp.org

www.toefl.org

www.scutwork.com (review of residency programs)

www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2997.html (FRIEDA - official program information)

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