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Medical Student Externships and the Match Process during the COVID-19 Recovery

Introduction

As the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic continues, medical students entering next year's match in search of Anesthesiology residency positions may be faced with different challenges than last year. During the pandemic, most medical schools and training programs strictly limited traveling to or from their programs and went to all-virtual interviews. As society attempts to return to pre-COVID norms, state and regional differences may occur with respect to students' abilities to travel and interview. This will require an even greater understanding by residency programs that not all students will have equitable opportunities to display their interest in either the field of Anesthesiology or a specific program. The potential hardships these students may face include, but are not limited to, barriers to scheduling away rotations (externships), difficulty in obtaining letters of recommendation (LORs) for their residency match applications, and obstacles to travel for residency interviews. The purpose of this letter is to draw attention to these challenges, show support for medical students and provide input to medical schools and residency programs during the recovery process.

Externships

Externships are vital rotations for many medical students since not all medical schools have dedicated Anesthesiology rotations for their students or provide adequate exposure to the specialty of Anesthesiology. For these reasons, many students have traditionally relied on externships to obtain anesthesia experiences at outside institutions. As the gradual recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic continues, students who wish to secure an externship may continue to find their opportunities greatly limited. Medical schools may continue to prohibit their students from obtaining externships. Students from schools that do allow travel for externships may find a greatly reduced number of institutions offering externship opportunities. These factors may have significant impact on the ability of students to secure externships, so residency programs should not interpret the absence of an externship in a student's application as a lack of interest in either their program or the field of Anesthesiology.

Difficulty Obtaining LORs

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States, many clinical experiences for students were put on hold. Reasons included protecting the students' health, reducing transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and preserving critical personal protective equipment (PPE). The decrease in student contact with patients and clinical faculty, along with the possibility of reduced available externships, may cause many students to find themselves having difficulty obtaining LORs from anesthesiologists. We ask medical schools to assist their students who are pursuing a career in Anesthesiology with finding rotations where they will be exposed to the field and able to obtain LORs. Secondly, we suggest that Anesthesiology residency programs remove any absolute requirements for LORs specifically from anesthesiologists. Strong LORs reflecting an applicant's character, scholarship, and work ethic can be written by a physician from any specialty who has worked closely with the applicant.

Interview Season

The details of the upcoming residency interview season currently remain unknown. The move to virtual interviews last year revealed both the benefits and pitfalls of virtual applications and acceptances in the match. We recognize that programs are monitoring current local/regional travel restrictions and evaluating how those restrictions may change by autumn. Some or all programs

may return to in-person interviews, while many may retain some form of virtual interviews. Decisions prohibiting or limiting student travel for interviews are in no way the choice or the fault of the students. In addition, the financial downturn may have limited students' access to the resources necessary for extensive travel during the interview season. Lastly, medical students may need to complete remaining clinical requirements that were not offered during the pandemic, thus limiting their access to interview travel time. At the current time, we strongly urge every residency program to make virtual interviews readily available for all applicants. Further, applicants should be reassured that the choice or necessity of a virtual interview will not negatively impact their ranking.

Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE)

MSPEs should reflect any limitations that the school placed on students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These may include, but are not limited to, Pass/Fail grades, postponed shelf exams, incompletes grades on a transcript, and lack of exposure to clinical rotations.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic altered all of our usual routines and expectations. As society returns to pre-pandemic norms, we believe that the processes for the next residency application cycle will need to be fluid. The details of the application process will likely vary from institution to institution due to a number of factors including vaccination prevalence and other regional metrics. ASA strongly supports our nation's medical students as we emerge from this unconventional time. ASA also acknowledges the difficult decisions being made by medical schools and residency programs alike during our return to normalcy. We sincerely hope that when the results of the match are announced, each student will have found the right program to shape them into the anesthesiologist of tomorrow.