

Reflections on the 2020–2021 IM residency interview season

DOMINICK TAMMARO, MD, MACP

The 2020–2021 Academic Year was unprecedented in experience for students, residents and fellows in all disciplines. In accordance with Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) guidelines, medical student clinical experiences were interrupted, with core clerkships truncated, converted to virtual experiences, or otherwise altered. Senior students found less opportunity for Acting Internships with which to practice the skills they would need as interns. Many senior students took the initiative to graduate early and become “pre-terns”, working in the Alternate Hospital site at the Convention Center and on the wards at our hospitals, helping expand the clinical workforce in a manner that had substantial positive impact. In this way, many students restored their clinical experiences and, in our experience at Brown, all came to their internships prepared, eager to move on and fulfilled by their work.

Against that backdrop, the 2020–2021 interview season was unique and occurred after almost a year’s experience with virtual meetings. Below, I share some of my observations:

- Residency applicants were able to apply to more programs and were able to interview at these programs without the need to spend money on travel and accommodations and without creating big gaps in their senior-year academic schedules. In this way, the residency interview process has leveled the playing field among students, independent of financial status or location. Programs and applicants were just a click away.
- With such ease of application, students applied to a record number of programs per applicant. This fact, coupled with the compressed interview season schedule, made it challenging to review all applications in a holistic manner.
- Residency programs found the virtual interview day more efficient to manage and organize.
- Cost savings realized by the absence of in-person lunches, dinners, and open houses, were redirected to online videos to present resident perspectives, program descriptions and virtual tours.
- In our program, we typically conduct one faculty interview per in-person applicant. Using a virtual interview, we were able to conduct two faculty interviews per applicant and include faculty from our partner institutions who previously were only infrequently able to participate in this important process.

The virtual season posed some challenges as well as opportunities.

- Some applicants reported that they were unable to assess the “culture” of a program virtually. Recorded sessions and panel discussions displaced the informality and spontaneity of time spent with residents in an unprogrammed manner. The nature of virtual meeting platforms required organization and structure to allow individuals to be heard without interruption or cacophony.
- Virtual interviews and program reviews do not substitute for exploring a new city – getting a feel for the cultural and recreational offerings by a stroll downtown between the interview day and the open house social with the residents. With the program presentations and interviews, some applicants did not feel that the cost of an in-person visit solely to take the pulse of the city was worth the expense or time out of their rotations.

There is no consensus among Graduate Medical Education leaders as to whether virtual residency interviews are here to stay. The Coalition for Physician Accountability, a task force created to explore the transition between Undergraduate and Graduate Medical Education, released proposals for public comment, which included the recommendation that residency interviews for the coming 2021–2022 interview season remain virtual. Many of us are flexing creative muscle in order to design hybrid systems which attempt to capture the best of both options. Of course, as of this writing, neither residency programs nor their matched applicants have fully experienced the outcome of the Virtual Match – that will have to wait until July 1 and beyond. I am optimistic that, once residency leadership and their new interns meet each other in person for the first time this summer (that sounds strange!), together we will be able to learn from this past year and develop a suitable Version 2.0 for the coming 2021–2022 Academic Year.

Author

Dominick Tamaro, MD, MACP, Professor of Medicine; Director of the Internal Medicine Residency Program, the Alpert Medical School of Brown University.

Correspondence

Dominick Tamaro, MD, MACP
Rhode Island Hospital
593 Eddy Street, Jane Brown Suite 0100
Providence, RI 02903
401-444-4083, Fax 401-444-3056

Dominick_tamaro@brown.edu, www.brownim.org