

As medical school comes to a close

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"THE DAYS FEEL LIKE WEEKS BUT THE WEEKS feel like days," an older classmate told me during medical school orientation, reciting the familiar adage. While past years' graduating medical students must have felt a similar out-of-body experience as they prepared to matriculate to various residencies and research programs, I can't help but feel that there must be a unique sense of compression for those of us who spent our fourth year in the thick of the COVID pandemic. Between truncated clerkships and modified electives, time spent volunteering on COVID phone hotlines or at testing sites, and the isolating experience of lockdown, looking back on this year evokes an even greater feeling of condensed time – and space – than anticipated. It is a certainty of life that a recollection is an abridged version of events. I can remember my first cut in anatomy, the first code I attended, and the first delivery I rushed to on my NICU overnight, but I know that in conjuring these memories I have abbreviated them, intensified them, creating a snapshot of what was, in reality, more like a film reel.

But what is entirely surreal about this past year is that the everyday experiencing of things somehow felt curtailed and artificial. I saw hospital facades and facilities as pixels and viewed my future co-residents as tiny squares on a computer screen during interview days and post-interview social hours. Everything

that I expected to experience in vivid color was reduced to a two-dimensional version, viewed from the same nondescript white desk chair, in the same room, in the same suit. From within the same four walls I was expected to determine my "fit" in a community that I could not fully engage with.

Of course, the Match process can be disorienting and artificial in one sense. Programs often cater to an audience of elite medical students, who themselves are groomed to present a certain image of competence and confidence. The stereotypes of specialties and programs and cities may influence which programs students apply to and how they create their rank order list.

Certainly there have been advantages to this unprecedented application cycle: students who would not be able to travel to certain programs (either due to logistics or the often egregious financial burden imposed by the Match process) were able to entertain the possibility of matching on their opposite coast or in cities like Seattle, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco, where they would have faced the choice of shelling out hundreds of dollars for a hotel room or sleeping on a friend's sofa to attend an interview day.

I hope that in the future the medical community can incorporate the benefits of virtual interviewing with the obvious advantages of in-person interviews, and that the significant financial burden of

applying to dozens of schools will be offset by more virtual information sessions and digital interviews, with options to travel for in-person meet-ups, physical tours, and welcome weekends.

The objective seems to be balancing the importance of finding that intangible "fit" in a community while combating the embedded bias of the academic medical system, which continues to select a racially and socio-economically similar group of residents every year. Appreciating that while there may be a "je ne sais quoi" or specific "culture" of a program, there are also tangible indications of a program's and applicant's shared values, whatever those may be. How can programs demonstrate their allocation of resources to resident wellness and support, or their relationship with the local community? There must be ways to do this in person and virtually.

From my own vantage point, it seems that this year has brought more guesswork into what starting residency will be like. I can only hope it's a bit like Dorothy's experience going from Kansas to Oz: I've seen the programs on paper and in greyscale (and on ZOOM) and hope they will actualize in technicolor as everything I have hoped for. "You were there, and you, and you," I'll say to my co-residents who I met on ZOOM calls and virtual happy hours, to the program coordinator who might as well be AI software for all I know, and the department chair who seemed friendly enough

when I watched the recorded welcome video the night before my interview as I applied zit cream and ironed my suit.

While I understand that residency programs will always be a bit like the Wizard – presenting themselves as omniscient benefactors who can ensure our futures as successful physicians, rather than fallible humans working within a limited system with ingrained biases and flaws – this year it feels like there are even more barriers up between the graduating students and the programs we will be joining come July; for instance, I have never stepped foot in the hospital I will be spending 80 hours each week in for the next three years.

As I unpacked my cap and gown from a cardboard shipping box casually dropped at my doorstep, I thought about what I had expected graduating medical school to look and feel like. What has been most strange about this year has

been the lack of ceremony that has accompanied major milestones. There was no Match Day gathering at our medical school and my parents will be watching me take the Physician's Oath via ZOOM. I won't get to shake my Deans' hands when they hand me my diploma, or take pictures with my friends in the medical school. Many of my classmates have forgone the idea of an in-person graduation to go home early and spend more time with family before starting their respective residencies. The gratitude I feel to have Matched at my dream program and to pursue my vocation is tinged with sadness and a sense of loss. A moment that I expected to feel so monumental already feels a bit compressed. Perhaps that is a product of graduating during the pandemic, or maybe it's just the reality of something intense and all-consuming coming to a close. ❖

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