Here's how many residency programs med students really apply to

AUG 11, 2015

Lyndra Vassar
News Writer

Take a guess: How many residency programs does the average medical student apply to each year? A survey of more than 1,000 fourth-year students explored this question, and the results were very telling.

Whether you’re a first-year student beginning to plan for residency or a seasoned vet already looking ahead to your next phase of training, check out this graphic to see the number of residency programs your peers applied to in each specialty. Future applicants, here’s what to expect.
Capturing the student perspective

Newly published research in Academic Medicine captures the sheer volume of activities graduating students undertake as they seek to secure a residency slot. This study is unique in that it is “the first national, representative sample of fourth-year medical students from U.S. MD-granting medical schools,” according to authors of the study.

With a sample size of 1,376 students from 20 schools, the study was able to look at the influence of career specialty choice and other factors on the activities of graduating medical students.

Applying for residency: Student applications by the numbers

Of those factors, applying to residency programs ranked high on the fourth-year to-do list, with students submitting a whirlwind of applications that sometimes climbed to high double digits.

Students applied to the most programs when they were interested in internal medicine (20.7 percent), surgery (18.8 percent) and pediatrics (14.6 percent). Students applying to psychiatry and radiology submitted the lowest number of applications (with 5.1 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively).

Behind these percentages lies another story: Arduous nights of applying to programs no matter the hour, the rotations they may have the next day or the mounting application fees. Students in the survey proved that applying to residency is such a priority, it even eclipses the moments of personal reflection and nostalgia that tend to capture the average graduating student, according to the study.

Amid concerns of a predicted physician shortage, the stakes of a med student’s final year are high—both personally and for the patient population. In a time when a growing percentage of students have found themselves unmatched in training limbo, securing a residency spot and preparing for training is understandably the top priority for fourth-year students, evident in the number of programs to which they apply for residency.

Broken down by specialty, here’s the average number of programs students applied to:

- Surgery: 58.2
- Radiology: 41.8
- Emergency medicine: 41.3
- OB-GYN: 36.4
- Internal medicine: 34.6
- Anesthesiology: 31.7
Why students are so concerned with residency applications

While the exact reason for this application volume isn’t entirely known, authors of the study agree that applying to residency is more competitive for today’s physician in training.

Compared to previous research, students surveyed for this study may seem more driven by residency selection and preparation because matching to a residency program was much more challenging when this study was conducted, the authors said.

“You by 2014, there were as many as nine applicants for each residency position, and failure to match in the [National Resident Matching Program] was associated with dire consequences, including failure to obtain any residency at all,” the study said.

But if you’re applying to programs next year, stay positive. Despite the high number of applications students submitted, 94.8 percent of students surveyed in the study still matched to a program in their chosen specialty.

Tell us: How many programs did you apply to during your final year of training? If you haven’t applied yet, do you know how many programs you plan to pursue in your specialty? Share your thoughts on the AMA Medical Student Facebook or in the comments below.

Also, stay tuned for a special series from AMA Wire® on preparing for residency, which will feature expert advice on compiling your best application and how to make the most of your fourth year as you transition to residency.

Note: An earlier version of this infographic incorrectly reported the standard deviation rather than the mean for the number of programs applied to and the number of interviews. The above infographic has been corrected.