Residents answer top student questions about away rotations

SEP 14, 2015

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A national survey of more than 1,000 medical students found that coordinating away rotations consumes a significant amount of time during their fourth year of training. That’s why it’s important to prepare early.

And we have insights from the right people to help you. Here’s a roundup of the top advice from residents on how they prepared for away rotations and strengthened their chances for a successful match.

Students asked a panel of residents in anesthesiology, orthopedic surgery, cardiology and obstetrics/gynecology their top questions about preparing away rotations as part of a special presentation filmed for the AMA’s Succeeding from Medical School to Practice resource. Their top questions and responses included:

How do I set up my away rotations?

The panel says: Generally, you’ll want to start researching potential programs where you’d like to pursue away rotations in your third year. If you begin researching them as a first or second year student—even better. Once you’ve identified the potential programs at which you’d like to pursue away rotations, contact your school and programs of interest to receive the proper approval to attend the rotations. Also give yourself time to arrange housing and other accommodations. It’s best to complete this process before the beginning of your fourth year.

Insider tips: “I did a lot of away rotations, but that’s because I finished most of my required courses [in my] third year, so I had a lot of free time. I even used some of my vacation time to do electives. I think I did four externships. You have to contact programs early enough, so you’ll want to start thinking about it maybe toward the end of your third year. I had to get a letter from my dean and the person in charge of [my] grades [for approval].”—anesthesiology resident
“I was in med school on the West Coast and wanted to do residency on the East Coast. People told me that was going to pose a problem, so what I did was took a block of time and instead of doing multiple away rotations at different times, I did them all at once on the East Coast. I went out there at one time and basically spent three months straight in the New York area and just did as many rotations as I could.

“If I didn’t have a rotation at a place that I wanted to go to, I would call them up and say, ‘Would you mind if I came just to shadow someone for a couple weeks?’ Just to kind of get in there, then volunteer to present at conferences and things of that nature.” — orthopedic surgery resident

**When should I actually begin my away rotation?**

**The panel says:** It’s wise to complete your away rotations early in your fourth year, so you can list this new clinical experience on your residency applications for the Match and alleviate unnecessary pressure to scramble for rotations later in the year.

**Insider tips:** “I actually did a rotation while I was a third year. If you can somehow get it, and your school will let you swing it, you can do [an away rotation] your third year. If not, [make it] the very first thing [you do in your] fourth year. Ophthalmology, ENT and a couple others are early match specialties. You match in January, which is kind of nice because once you match, you’re cruising the rest of your fourth year.” — ophthalmology resident

“It’s strongly recommended that you do the rotations you’re interested in for residency during August, September and October [of your fourth year].” — anesthesiology resident

**How do you find housing during away rotations?**

**The panel says:** Housing options will vary drastically by individual, region and the number of away rotations you pursue in one location. But in general, pursue rotations in places where you know someone who may be able to help provide temporary housing.

**Insider tips:** “I went to where my family or friends were. I also went one place where I knew somebody in residency .... I think that’s also important because you’re just going to be staying there for one month, and finding housing for just one month is kind of hard, so you might want to coordinate with [residents] above you [to see] if they’d like to help you out with housing.”— anesthesiology resident

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How will an away rotation impact me in the Match?

The panel says: Away rotations are crucial because they can bolster your residency applications, especially if you’re trying to match to a competitive specialty or a specific residency program. They offer a chance for program directors and faculty to gain a new perspective of you, which can benefit your application, depending on your performance during the away rotation.

Insider tips: “I’ve sat on [resident] selection committees, and it actually makes a very big difference if they’ve met you, they’ve seen you in person and know how you interact with people and patients. So if you have a specific place you want to go, by all means, [apply for an externship], and do it early.” — cardiology resident

“I come from a six-person OB-GYN program ..., but what I would stress to all [students] is [to] realize [that] an elective can make or break you if you’re there. If you’re going [to a program], go there, commit to it and take that month to put your best foot forward because during that month, the residents and faculty are going to get a perspective of you they can’t really get on paper—and that can be positive [or] negative. During that month, you can really shine or sink. So if you’re going to do it, commit to it, do it and work hard.” — obstetrics/gynecology resident

Do I really need to do an away rotation for residency?

The panel says: In general, the decision to commit to away rotations really depends on your background and strengths as an applicant. Before you apply for an away rotation, be sure to consider how it aligns with the overall competitiveness of your application.

Insider tips: “My program has eight residents, and usually around six of the eight have done away rotations every year .... So say you go into a residency that only takes two or three residents a year, for the most part, [program directors are] going to want to take known commodities, so doing a rotation in a [program] that takes fewer number of residents might actually be helpful.”— orthopedics resident

“If you’re a really strong applicant on paper, you’ve got great scores, you’ve got great research, great recommendations, you don’t have to always do an away rotation .... But if you feel there’s this place you really want to go, you’re really confident, you know someone there and already know you like the people [in the program], then it might be good to do an away rotation. But don’t feel like you always necessarily have to do one.”— ophthalmology resident

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