Making a Match ranking list? A fellow’s advice: Think long term

JAN 27, 2017

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The Match ranking process closes in less than a month, and amid the pressure of developing their ranking lists medical students may lose sight of what comes after residency. A physician at the University of Chicago Medicine suggests med students look at residency not as the phase between medical school and a career, but as the first chapter in their professional story.

It starts with revising one’s self-image, according to Ajanta Patel, MD, who did her residency in pediatrics and is now doing a fellowship in pediatric pulmonology. Dr. Patel sometimes interviews applicants for the pediatrics residency program at the University of Chicago Medicine, and she senses that some residency applicants see themselves as students trying to ask for something, rather than as professionals with value.

You can tell that some don’t appreciate how wonderful and smart they are. They don’t realize they’re qualified, because they’re so used to being students. But they wouldn’t get interviews if the programs didn’t think they were great,” she said. “Yes, you’re coming out of school, but you’re also applying to be a professional. You are entitled to take on that role.”
In fact, Dr. Patel noted, self-confidence and self-awareness should guide all of your decisions in the transition to residency, including Match ranking.

“Be honest with yourself about what’s important to you and what your priorities are for training,” she said. “Think about where you want to go, what you want to be and how you want to practice, because your residency could grow into more than just a three-year experience. That’s not something I thought about when I was going through Match, but now I realize how much my residency decision is impacting my career in the long term.”

In terms of putting those priorities into action, she noted, medical students should not hesitate to get back in touch with programs after their interviews.

“Don’t be afraid to follow up and ask questions. The programs have already submitted their lists, so it can’t hurt you,” Dr. Patel said. “Ask about the particulars of each program. What are the faculty members like? Would they support your getting involved in research, if you want to do that? What kinds of patients would you be seeing? This is really your only time to ask those questions. Feel free to email the people who gave you their cards, or to call the program office. You just have to take the initiative.”

Dr. Patel also noted that being matched with one program does not close the door on opportunities with the others. Pay attention to every place where you have interviewed and save your notes, she said, because one day you will need a job, and you might do well to reconnect with one or more of them.

Her last piece of advice for those about to submit their Match ranking lists: Don’t overthink it.

“Everything is going to be fine. Anywhere you go, you’re going to become a doctor,” she said. “Sure, the strength of the program can affect how strong of a physician you become, but a lot of your training is your own legwork. Put yourself out there, ask the good questions, and then try to relax.”

And even if you don’t match, it’s not the end of the line.

“I had friends who didn’t match, so they scrambled into a different subspecialty and everything worked out,” Dr. Patel said. “I also had friends who matched with their top choices, but after a month they realized it wasn’t a good fit, and they simply moved. No matter what happens, the main thing to remember is that everything is going to be fine.”

“No other professionals go through this structured process where one day you roll the dice to learn what your destiny is going to be. Every doctor I know went through this. Embrace it. It’s fun.”

More on Match
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