Applying to more than 1 medical specialty? What you should know

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When it comes to your future, it pays to be practical. In terms of applying to residency programs, that may mean diversifying your search to include more than one specialty.

If you are a medical student applying to more than one specialty, whether it’s due to uncertainty about your career path or the competitiveness of your application, here’s what you need to know.

Looking for a resource to research residency programs? FREIDA™, the AMA’s comprehensive residency and fellowship database, includes the nearly 12,000 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education-accredited residency programs, and it has a new look and feel that offers a streamlined user experience.

How common is it?

Looking at data from the 2018 Main Residency Match, assembled by the National Resident Matching Program, that depends on what type of applicant you are.

On average, U.S. allopathic senior medical students were less prone to rank multiple specialties. The average number of specialties ranked by that group was 1.2 for U.S. seniors who matched and 1.6 for those who didn’t. The numbers were very similar for senior students from U.S. osteopathic medical schools—those who matched ranked 1.2 specialties and those who didn’t ranked 1.5.

Among international medical graduates (IMGs), those who were U.S. citizens and matched ranked 1.5 specialties; members of that demographic who didn’t match ranked the same number. Meanwhile, IMGs who weren’t U.S. citizens and matched ranked 1.3 specialties versus 1.4 for those who didn’t match.
Why rank more than one specialty?

Based on the numbers above, the primary driver of medical students ranking more than one specialty seems to be a desire to match. In 2018, U.S. allopathic seniors matched at a 94% clip, with three-quarters of them getting their top choice. By contrast, osteopathic seniors matched at an 81.7% rate, while 57.1% of IMGs matched.

Related to that is likely the competitiveness of specialty in which one hopes to match. For instance, among U.S. seniors who matched in 2018, students who labeled integrated interventional radiology as the preferred specialty were most likely to apply to more than one specialty. Among six specialties with more than 30 available positions that filled more than 90% of their spots with U.S. allopathic seniors in 2018, integrated interventional radiology topped the list.

How does the process differ?

In terms of your applicant profile, you are likely to need different personal statements for each specialty you apply to. You may also want to have different people write your letters of recommendation who are more suited to a certain specialty. You will also want to make sure you take the proper subinternships for each specialty you apply to. That can get tricky if you’re applying to numerous specialties.

Programs cannot see whether you are applying to more than one specialty through the residency application process.

The authors of a recent article—“Are You Applying to More Than One Specialty?”, published online in July in The Journal of Emergency Medicine—advised medical students that they “should generally not disclose plans to apply to more than one specialty unless there is a specific need to do so.”