What to expect as programs move to virtual residency interviews

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Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 update, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger discusses with experts the biggest changes to the residency application process due to COVID-19, including the virtual interview.

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Speakers

- Cheryl O'Malley, MD, associate dean, GME, University of Arizona College of Medicine
- Timothy Burns, JD, residency program coordinator, OB-GYN, UVM Larner College of Medicine
- Candise Johnson, MS, fourth-year medical student, University of Mississippi Medical Center

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 update. Today, we're discussing one of the biggest changes in the residency application process due to COVID-19, the virtual interview.

I'm joined today by Dr. Cheryl O'Malley, associate dean of graduate medical education and clinical associate professor of internal medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Phoenix, Timothy Burns, residency program coordinator obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine, and Candice Johnson, a fourth year medical student at the University of
Mississippi Medical Center. I’m Todd Unger. I am a chief experience officer in Chicago.

Mr. Burns, we’re going to start with you. We know the residency application process has changed pretty dramatically with COVID-19. Where are we in the process right now, and why is it so important to discuss the residency interview right now?

Burns: Thanks, Todd. COVID has definitely had an impact on recruitment. We are actually going to be getting applications and the MSPE letters starting tomorrow. This is actually a lot later than we have in past years, and we are actually going to be sending out our applications on invitations on November 10th and we're now going to be starting to interview on the 17th. And of course, we're actually going to virtual interviews now, which is actually new to all, both programs and applicants.

Unger: Well, we're going to have a lot to talk about, what those look like, and get your guidance on how to make them better. The switch to virtual interviewing was driven by the pandemic, but there are other potential benefits to moving to a virtual platform. Dr. O'Malley, can you talk about what those might be?

Dr. O'Malley: Sure. Prior to being the associate dean for GME, I was the internal medicine residency program director. And so, three years ago we switched to virtual interviews at that point, really driven by the fact that they were being used in so many other industries as a more convenient way to be able to connect on different people's schedules. So there's flexibility that goes with that. There's also really a lot of connection that can happen, and we've all seen that during the pandemic. So mainly the flexibility is the biggest benefit that I would see, and it has worked well for us over the last three years.

Johnson: I think from a student perspective that the obvious thing is definitely that we're saving a ton of money from not having to travel as much and not having to pay for hotels to go places. But also, we're not having to take time away from our clinical duties as a fourth year medical student, so we're having more time to learn and spend time with patients during our fourth year, which I think will be very beneficial because we're not spending those extra couple of days traveling to go to interviews as well.

Unger: Yeah, the amount of money that folks spend during those, it's pretty incredible as a percent of the expenditure, so that is quite bit of savings. Dr. O'Malley, one big concern about moving to virtual interviews is how to preserve meaningful interactions, really get a sense of not only the candidate, but the interactions between faculty, residents. How are you facilitating these kinds of more meaningful connections even though it's remote?

Dr. O'Malley: Yeah, well, when we did move to the virtual interviews, we actually preserved an in-person visit, and it was just shorter and more streamlined than previous visit days would be when you had to include the interviews as part of it. And so we were able to still allow that chance to be able to have applicants get to know our city and our residents and our community, but just in a more consolidated way since the interviews were separated by doing them virtually in advance. So I think
now with virtual, that's going to be a challenge as well, and so switching that same sense of being able to get to know the residents and moving that to virtual with small group interactions with residents and applicants.

Unger: Anything you've found that makes them feel more personal?

Dr. O'Malley: Well, as far as those, you want to have some more one-on-one time. So in our times where the applicants would come onsite for the applicant visit day, we had more applicants than we would usually have on a traditional visit day. So we had one day when we had 35 applicants, but we still broke them up into groups of five for tours with a resident. So that way then, it was just five applicants with one resident being able to get that resident's perspective. And then during the dinner or the other event, it was moving around, getting a chance to be able to talk in small groups. So I think that's a critical thing to preserve, so it's not just this mass of applicants with a big group of residents at once. It's important to break down into smaller groups.

Burns: And we're actually going to be doing that with having a virtual happy hour or get together the night before the interview where we're actually going to be using Zoom. Have the applicants come in, have an icebreaker so they get to know them, and then have breakout rooms where they can go in and meet with residents and discuss what is it like to live in Burlington? What is it like to be an intern? And things like that. And each room is going to have a topic.

And we're also going to be using social media, like Instagram, encouraging where we're going to have spotlights for both our faculty and residents, so the applicants can get to know them and actually see the interaction when they're on the floors and things like that. So social media, I think, is going to be vital this year.

Unger: Ms. Johnson, how are you feeling at this point in the process? And what can programs do to help students with next steps and do well in this new paradigm?

Johnson: Well, as someone who just recently submitted that ERAS application, it's very nerve wracking, but at the same time very relieving. I am very excited about this new chapter where I do get to interview and find a new residency program where I'm going to spend five years, and I'm really excited about that.

So I think that the big things are, I want to know what it's like to be a resident at this location. I want to know about the surroundings, what it's like to live in that location. I want to know if the residents have good wellness, like if they're happy where they are, if they're able to get as much work in as they need to get in to do well on their core exam and on their exams that they have in residency. And also, I want to make sure that I'm finding a place that has a good fit and that I fit into the environment that I'm going into.

Unger: Mr. Burns, Dr. O'Malley, you just heard that from one of your prospective applicants, how are
you going to accomplish that?

**Dr. O'Malley:** Some of it is what we just described with that interaction with the residents and really appreciating that that is such an important component of the interaction and of the interview day. The other part is just to be able to have applicants feel at ease by having enough plans for backup. If there are tech issues, don't blame that on the applicant, just understand it's the nature of the beast. And also being flexible, knowing that that's part of what we always had to do with regular interviews, maybe you didn't see it as much. There was a lot of scrambling behind the scenes. But just to be able to support these students because we know that this is a big strain on you all.

**Burns:** And I actually, I agree. I totally agree. And I think there are ways to do it, but I think we really need to communicate with the applicants and the medical students and provide them with as much information as possible. So I always do this ahead of time is I've always sent out my schedules, and I actually tell them who they are interviewing with. Because I know the medical students want to look up and see, get more information about the faculty members that they're going to be meeting with. And I think we need to continue to do that.

I always like to ask them, like I'm dealing with OB-GYN, what are their interests in OB-GYN? Because I want to match them up with a faculty member that has a similar interest, and we're going to continue to do that with virtual interviewing.

And I agree with Dr. O'Malley. I was in Boston for a long time. We would have snow storms. And it was actually funny, most of the applicants made it, it was my faculty who had trouble getting in. And you have to troubleshoot. It's going to be the same way with technology. Just make sure the applicants know what the backup plans, and also your faculty, know what the backup plans, and have backup plan A, backup plan B, and you should be all set.

**Unger:** Yeah, a lot of what I've found through kind of this remote process and working on updates like this, a lot of attention goes into the technology, but it's the storytelling that's the hard part. And for you and your residency programs, giving that real sense of what it's like to be a resident there is the challenge ahead of you.

On our end at the AMA, we've upgraded FREIDA, which is our residency and fellowship database that allows programs to post virtual tours. How are you capturing your culture, your campus, and doing that all virtually? What are some of the tips there?

**Dr. O'Malley:** I'll start out with just the idea that we have—I'm now DIO, so we created those fancy videos, and that's something that we've done to be able to help get a sense of the place and the feel and be able to, I hope, achieve some scale with helping all of our programs at one time to create these kinds of videos.

But more importantly, and what I've encouraged programs to do, is to not use the fancy video for the
applicant visit day, instead to be able to have one of the current residents walk them through a virtual tour, but that virtual tour could just be a series of photos, including places where they live and places that are restaurants that they really like. And so, you can be able to virtually capture a lot of that and still have it have the authentic voice of your current residents rather than making it feel like a big production.

**Burns:** And I actually think, especially in this day and age of COVID where a lot of institutions are having financial issues as well, that there are ways you can do it and not have to spend a lot of money. I have two residents that are actually putting together a video tomorrow, and they’re going to walk through the hospital and the different areas. And I actually think that’s really good because you actually get to see the residents in their everyday work life.

**Dr. O’Malley:** One of the other things we did is we had graduates just record themselves on their iPhones, or whatever their phone was, just record themselves and talk about where they are now and how the program prepared them. And we never used to have that in the regular interview day, but by trying to think about how to have some of that content more available really allowed us to get creative with bringing in other voices than the ones that were usually physically present on the interview day.

**Burns:** And actually one of the things that I thought of today is ask the applicants. When you invite them, ask them what questions do you have for the residents? What questions do you have for the faculty? And put together a sheet for everyone because a lot of people are going to have the same questions. So this is allowing us to think outside the box and hopefully make a much better experience than what we had before.

**Unger:** I really love what you’re saying. I think it resonates with our experience. There’s always a role for a great promotional video, but in this day and age, the benchmark for what you produce is a lot lower. And I think being scrappy and being creative in your approach does bring a lot of authenticity to it and allows you to tell a story that you might not have done before. So I look forward to see what you’re doing.

Mr. Burns, how would you advise Candice here in terms of her interview? Do you have any tips on how to present yourself most effectively in a virtual interview?

**Burns:** I actually think just to be yourself. I mean, I think that’s the most important thing. I think people really want to see who you are and get to know you. And I think it’s helpful, I know a lot of times they practice and practice and practice, and they have standard answers, but I think at times, it’s really good to be yourself. And I do think it’s good to be prepared, but I think it’s also good to make sure that the true person comes out when they’re being interviewed.

**Unger:** Well, I'll give you my top tips as well from having been on camera since the beginning of March. Great lighting, Candice, you are doing very well there. Good internet connection, get yourself a microphone and headset just to avoid outside distractions. And then, yeah, really let your
personality come through. It's hard in this environment, but that's where that will happen. Any other comments or suggestions?

Dr. O'Malley: Yeah, I think there's a lot of ways to make it work. And I think, as you said, let your personality come through, but also don't make it all be about around you. If we think about your attire or other things, that can often get distracting, if you had something that was too aconventional. And so, just being able to have it be focused on you and what you have to say and that energy.

I agree, I think the headsets are just fine. I think it does help in a lot of different ways to be able to eliminate some of those issues. And one of the backup things that we had to do was be able to be ready to switch over to your cell phone. Sometimes you were doing audio through the cell phone, but then you would have the video through whatever your internet was. So that flexibility is a chance to be able to show your ability to be able to adapt, which certainly in medicine, whichever specialty you're exploring, is going to expect you to be able to have to adapt on the fly and adjust as things don't go always as planned.

Unger: Ms. Johnson—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Burns: But I think it's also helpful just to make sure that you plan ahead, really make sure that you use the equipment that you're going to be using ahead of time and make sure it works, not only for the medical students, but also for the faculty as well. So we are going to be practicing with our faculty and we're going to make them--where you're going to be interviewing, you should use that particular setting.

Unger: Ms. Johnson, any questions for our other guests today about how to present yourself best?

Johnson: I guess one of the things that many students are worried about right now is that they had to choose between having a blank wall like I do right now or use a virtual background that they get offline. Which would you prefer us to have?

Burns: I actually find the virtual backgrounds can be a little bit distracting, especially when people are moving, and it doesn't actually move with yourself. So I actually think having a realistic, plain background is fine. I mean, it highlights the applicant, and that's the most important thing, not the background.

Dr. O'Malley: I agree. I've now done over 500 virtual interviews, and it was only during the time of COVID that I started seeing people use the backgrounds. And I loved seeing people's natural background, whatever it was, so I think the white is perfect.

Unger: Well, thank you so much, Dr. O'Malley, Mr. Burns, and Ms. Johnson, for being here today and sharing your perspectives on this important new part of the residency application process.
If you'd like more information on the virtual residency interview, you can view our new webinar, Residency Virtual Interview Planning and Troubleshooting, on the Accelerating Change in Medical Education page on the AMA website.

We'll be back soon with another COVID-19 update. For resources on COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. Thanks for joining us and please take care.

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