Concerned about matching? Experts offer 3 reasons for reassurance

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March 19, 2021, will mark the culmination of an unprecedented Match cycle. Disruptions to the process included cancellations to away rotations and no in-person interviews—measures put in place to contain COVID-19.

With an atypical Match cycle reaching its conclusion, some medical students may have more than the typical Match Day anxiety. While this year’s process has had more uncertainty than most, students should know that they will be supported no matter the Match Day result. Faculty members involved in the Match process offer some reasons for reassurance.

Remember: The process favors students

In a typical year, the number of unmatched graduates of U.S. medical schools is around 5%. That’s likely the case even this year, when some have posited that the distribution of interview slots disproportionately favored the top candidates.

“I think the Match rate is going to be similar to past years, maybe a tiny bit lower,” said Maya Hammoud, MD, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Michigan Medicine and the AMA’s special adviser on medical education innovation. “I suspect virtual interviews will not affect the process much. The matching market favors students. I suppose we will not know if virtual interviews impact the quality of the Match. But we should see similar percentages to previous years.”

Learn about the numbers behind the 2020 Match.

An extra round of SOAP

The Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (SOAP) is a vehicle through which eligible unmatched applicants in the Main Residency Match apply for and are offered positions that were not...
filled when the matching algorithm was initially processed.

Since the 2017 Match, SOAP has included three offer rounds. For the 2021 Match, a fourth round has been added. The rationale behind that decision, according to the NRMP, is that there has been an increase in the number of unfilled positions remaining after the SOAP process in recent years. The fourth round is also a response to the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming application and Match season due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In case Match rates are lower in the Main Residency Match, schools and residency programs have contingency plans.

“Every school mobilizes for its unmatched students,” said Kathleen Kashima, PhD, senior associate dean of students at the University of Illinois College of Medicine. “At our institution, our executive dean has asked us to prepare for various scenarios in this year’s SOAP. We have set up separate faculty teams in departments if we have them working to fill their residency spots, and if we have them working with unmatched students.”

No Match doesn’t mean your career’s over

Kashima spoke of alumni and faculty members in her institution who didn’t match.

“Faculty will talk with students that some of them or their colleagues didn’t match the first round or even through SOAP,” she said. “The message they offer is not matching doesn’t equate to your not being a physician. If that happens, it’s really thinking about what you need to do to adjust to go into the Match next year.”

Both Kashima and Dr. Hammoud pointed out that not getting a residency placement is a suboptimal result, but students still have options to strengthen their credentials for a future as a physician. Those options to better you Match odds include staying in touch with your medical school and taking Step 3 of the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE).