Meet your Match: Managing interview invites with Liz Southworth, MD
Featured topic and speakers

Residency interview invites often come at a heavily clinical period of medical school. In this episode of Making the Rounds, AMA News senior writer Brendan Murphy is joined by Liz Southworth, MD, a third-year obstetrics and gynecology resident at Michigan Medicine, to discuss how to manage interview invites, what to do if you don't get enough of them and how to prioritize your opportunities.

Speakers

- **Elizabeth Southworth, MD**, third-year obstetrics and gynecology resident, Michigan Medicine
- **Brendan Murphy**, senior news writer, American Medical Association

**Host**

- **Todd Unger**, chief experience officer, American Medical Association

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Transcript

**Unger:** Welcome to Making the Rounds. Today, as part of our “Meet Your Match” series, AMA senior news writer Brendan Murphy interviews Dr. Liz Southworth, a third-year obstetrics and gynecology resident.
Dr. Southworth shares her specific Match experience managing interview invitations and email, as well as the advice she gives to her mentees who are approaching residency selection. Here’s news writer Brendan Murphy.

**Murphy:** Hello and welcome to Meet Your Match, a special series on Making the Rounds. I'm Brendan Murphy, senior news writer at the American Medical Association. Today we have the pleasure of hearing from Dr. Elizabeth Southworth, a third-year obstetrics and gynecology resident at Michigan Medicine. Dr. Southworth, thank you so much for being here. How are you doing today?

**Dr. Southworth:** I'm doing great. Thank you so much for having me.

**Murphy:** So, this is the second episode in this series and today we're going to be talking about residency interview invitations. That's going to include managing the wait for those invitations, the logistics of scheduling interviews and what to do if you aren't getting enough interview invites. Dr. Southworth will give you her experiences as a recent veteran of the Match and insights that those entering this residency election cycle may find helpful. To start off, Dr. Southworth, can you give our listeners a bit about your background and expertise in the area of the Match as a whole and the interview invite arena?

Of course. I went through the Match process just after and into COVID. My interviews were in person; however, my Match Day was virtual because of COVID and where we were at with that. And so, during that time, I became really interested in how COVID was going to impact this process. I was the American Medical Association's Medical Student Section chair on medical education during that transition and was really fortunate to work with my colleagues in the AMA MSS on thinking about how COVID was going to impact the residency application process in the future, as well as other various aspects of undergraduate medical education.

My co-interns and I, recognizing that our transition to residency would be affected by COVID, sought to create a virtual curriculum to get us all up to speed, as many of our boot camp opportunities were taken away. And so, we worked with social media to create a national OB/GYN residency preparatory curriculum and had a lot of fun with it, and three years later it's turned into this amazing project that over 80% of incoming OB/GYN interns participate in, called the OB/GYN Intern Challenge. And so, I'm really interested in this transition to residency space, as well as the residency application process itself. I've been fortunate to work with ACOG, which is our national organization, to create a virtual residency showcase every year, where residencies across the country post on social media to share things like their curriculum, who their residents are, what opportunities they have in research and advocacy, and applicants are invited to follow along with a specific hashtag for this week-long event.

And it's been a really amazing opportunity to watch both residencies across the country showcase their programs and also to watch applicants get more information in preparation for their application cycle. So really interested in this process as well as how can we help applicants get more information.
so they can make really good choices about this really important next step.

**Murphy:** Great. Well, it sounds like you are pretty uniquely qualified to speak about the Match in general, and this particular arena of the Match, it's going to be really helpful hearing from a recent medical student. You're also going to have a very interesting vantage point of having gone through the Match when in-person interviews were the reality and having been a resident when virtual interviews were the reality. So that'll be interesting to hear how you've observed it and how you experienced it.

I think a good place to start here, since we're going to be talking about interview invites specifically, is how did you manage your interview invite during what for some students can be a very busy time clinically?

**Dr. Southworth:** That's such a critical question because I think that balance between you're a medical student on a rotation, you're still wanting to be prepared for your clinical responsibilities, make a good impression, you're still working towards your grade at that point as well, balancing that with this really important time in your professional life where there are some unpredictable things that can pop up that really do need to be responded to quickly, and I think that the best thing that you can do during this time is to be very honest and open with the residents, the attendings, the staff that you're working with.

We all have been through this process. For some it was a few years ago, for others it may be decades ago but this happens every year and so this is not a surprise, a change. We in the medical education space are familiar with this process enough to recognize that it's both a stressful and a very exciting time.

And if you need to step away, communicate that clearly, let people know why you're looking at your phone so that no one assumes that you're not paying attention, that you're not distracted but that you're working on your residency interview application or your residency interview invites, and being able to kind of share that up front with the team and let them know, “Hey, this is the time of the year when I'm expecting some invitations to come in and I may be on my phone more than I normally am.” And you can even ask them what their recommendations are on how to handle that on their specific clinical rotation.

**Murphy:** So, some students have given their email passwords to their fellow students or a family member. I've talked to a program director who advises students to set up a separate email just for interview invitations. Did you do anything to manage the flow so you could get them as soon as they came in? How stressful was that as well?

**Dr. Southworth:** I was very lucky to be on an OB/GYN-specific rotation when I had interview invitations coming in, and so the team was really supportive and invested and excited for me as I was stepping away from clinical responsibilities to respond to emails. I did make a separate email account. I had my mom have the password and I talked to her about the plan, and I think if you're going to have...
someone else assist you with scheduling and responding, it’s important to talk to them, especially if they’re a parent, a loved one, a friend who’s not in this process and share with them what the plan is.

So, I told her that we would be accepting invitations throughout the day, that I would try my best to let her know when I would not be able to be looking at my email, and that would be the time period that she was kind of covering my email responses. And in preparation I let her know when the interview dates were supposed to be for all of the programs that I had applied to and so she had a good idea of where to start accepting on which dates, where to accept interviews at.

And that seemed to work really well. I had a hard copy of the calendar that I had printed out. And I actually wrote down all the potential interview dates for each of the program and I kind of looked to see which ones were overlapping, and I created almost an optimal schedule. And I created a few different versions just depending on which order the interviews were going to come in.

Murphy: That is a very thorough plan. It might be a little easier to plan this year because a number of specialties are doing standardized interview offer dates. There are six of them, in fact. At least six, I should say. Those are ophthalmology, urology, OB/GYN, general surgery, dermatology, orthopedic surgery and otolaryngology. I would ask, when did you start getting those interviews?

Dr. Southworth: So that is such a good point to bring up that we’re really moving towards a step in the medical education community to make this process less stressful for students and one of the most stressful parts of it was not knowing when I was going to get an interview. I would say my year, OB/GYN was one of the specialties that I would like to say is kind of leading the charge in this, in a lot of the student-focused changes to the residency application process.

We, my year, had a relatively standardized time frame of about two weeks and during that two-week time, you could have interviews come in in any part of that period. And so, I kind of knew from 7:00 A.M. in the morning until about 5:00 P.M. at night is when I would expect interviews to come in. I was happy to not have any interviews come in at random hours when I would otherwise have been sleeping and I had a pretty good experience with interviews not being offered—I had a pretty good experience with interviews not being over-offered, meaning most of the interviews that I was offered I was able to schedule with ease and I was able to get the interview date that I had wanted.

Murphy: That’s good to hear, a lot of medical students I know are stressed about this process but I did recently speak to someone on the medical school side of the equation who said they couldn’t recall an instance of a student missing an interview invitation and then not being able to get that interview. Would you say that that’s accurate to your experience as well?

Dr. Southworth: I think so and I think just to the same point of many specialties working on a standard interview release date, there’s another standard, at least in OB/GYN specifically, where the recommendation is to not over offer interviews, and that effort actually is a very significant
improvement in the past, where you'd have to scramble and accept everything upfront because you were afraid that they may run out of interview spots.

And the current recommendation for most standard interview recommendations would say, do not over offer. Only offer the number of interviews that you are planning to complete, and then from the student perspective, that's very helpful, because you have a little bit more time to look and see what you get in and be more strategic on which ones you accept.

**Murphy:** So, am I hearing this right, that most of the interviews you had, came maybe a few weeks after you submitted applications and applications to open to programs?

**Dr. Southworth:** So, most residencies will have their specific timeline set up. So, for example, the OB/GYN timeline is that applications are submitted and the deadline is October 1. That is internally within my specialty.

That being said, in ERAS, applications were due September 29 and then interview offers this year are to be offered on October 25. So that's about three to four weeks after the final submission date and I would say that's pretty common for most specialties.

**Murphy:** Thanks. The data across specialty does seem to indicate a few weeks out is when the bulk of the interview invitations will go out but they can go off for well over a month if even into the end of the year. So, for students who don't hear right away, that doesn't mean all is lost and we'll touch on what to do if you're not getting enough interviews later.

I'm going to ask you to kind of change your perspective on this, Dr. Southworth. At the top, you mentioned you went through in-person interviews. Now interviews, the recommendation is this year that they will largely be virtual. How do you think that changes the scheduling process?

**Dr. Southworth:** The last several years that have been virtual interviews I think has improved the scheduling process significantly. For example, when I went through this process, I had to not only look at the dates and the times of interviews but also the physical location of where I might have to travel and consider things like flights and my schedule clinically as well and logistics of how much time I would need to take off.

The really nice thing is from a logistics standpoint and also a financial standpoint, virtual interviews allow for more flexibility from the interviewees, and you're able to take two interviews on different coasts two days in a row, which otherwise may not have logistically been possible in the past. And so scheduling interviews in the virtual era of the interview process I think is actually easier than when it was in person.
**Murphy:** Even in this virtual interview world, which does certainly open up more opportunities, it is possible, maybe even likely, that you're going to run into some scheduling conflicts. How do you prioritize which interviews are most important to you? What happens if you get an interview invite from your 20th or 25th choice while you're still waiting on those interview invites from your top few choices?

**Dr. Southworth:** I think the most important thing to remember during this process is if you applied there, then it should be a program that you are interested in interviewing at. And if you get an interview offer, I would take it. Now, you can always decline an interview offer but unless you’re part of a specialty that is giving batch offers and you have a known period of time where you can gather the information of where you receive offers and then you can decide which ones you're accepting and declining, if you are in a specialty where there's a rolling offer process, I would accept those initial offers as you are waiting for potential programs that you are more interested in that are higher on your list of interest because you never know what may happen.

And the last position you want to be in is where you were waiting on an offer or had declined an offer and the alternative offers don't come in, and then you're in a really bad spot because it's hard to, once you decline, go back and ask for that interview again because likely that spot is now gone and they've moved on to an applicant who is on a waitlist. It is easier to accept an offer and if something changes—your schedule, your availability or even your interest—declining that offer and allowing that position to be open for another applicant is easier logistically both for you and for the program.

**Murphy:** So back to your actual Match process, how many interviews did you do and what was the rough ratio of applications to interview invites for you?

**Dr. Southworth:** I applied to about 40 programs, and I had 15 offers and I interviewed at 12 programs.

**Murphy:** And that's about the range that students want to be in? Somewhere between 12, 15 interviews is—15 interview invites seems to be the magic number. If you do more than 15 interviews, the data seems to indicate its diminishing returns. That doesn't increase your chances of finding a match. On the other side of the coin, the red flag number seems to be if you're under 10 for many specialties. When you're getting to that lower interview number, what do you advise students who aren't getting enough of them to do?

**Dr. Southworth:** I think communicating your concerns early and often, with your advisors, is the only thing as a student you really can do and that's enough. You hopefully at this point have identified an advisor or two for this process, both in your medical school, perhaps in the specialty itself, who can help you navigate if you find yourself in that scenario.

It's important to take note of which programs you may be waitlisted at or be on a reserve list, and there is quite a bit of movement from that list, especially if you're in a specialty that has a set deadline for
when the first round of interviews need to be accepted or declined. And so, knowing those dates and being able to be aware of when you may move off of one of these wait lists is important.

Additionally, if you’re on a waitlist and it’s a program that you’re very interested in, it is reasonable to talk to your advisor on the acceptability within your specialty of reaching out to that program and letting them know that you’re very interested in interviewing with them, and perhaps even utilizing your contacts, your advisors, if you have ones that have relationships at certain programs.

Leveraging that kind of mentorship that you may have can be helpful as well. But I think leaning on your specialty-specific mentors and the faculty at your institution to help you navigate if you’re in that situation is really key and mentioning that to them early on in this process because they can be more helpful if they have time to work with you to help navigate that.

Murphy: That’s really helpful information. It would also be helpful to understand a little bit more about how that waitlist process works. Are you informed via email that you’re on the waitlist?

Dr. Southworth: Yes, generally when you receive an email from a residency program, it’ll tell you one of three things. It’ll either tell you that you’re invited for an interview and give you options for dates or direct you to an interview software system that they use to help them coordinate their interviews, or they may thank you for your application and notify you that you are not invited for an interview, and the last may say that you are on their waitlist and that they will be planning to reach out to you if an interview becomes available.

Depending on your specialty, they may actually give you a specific date as to when they’re going to be reevaluating their waitlists but that is something that you should ask your specialty advisor or mentors at your school if there is a specific time that you should be aware of or watching for as they may have more spots open for interviews.

Murphy: That’s very helpful, and I know we talked about how we were going to manage interview invites and that was a big chunk of this but I think it would be nice to at least tease some of the interview prep, which we will be covering in later episodes of Meeting Your Match but I at least would like to touch on it here a little. So, Dr. Southworth, how did you prepare for each individual interview?

Dr. Southworth: So, I think especially in now the virtual process preparing for interviews in some ways can be easier. The reason being is that you have an opportunity to do one of the hardest things, which is watch yourself answer questions because things are virtual and you’ll be doing Zoom-based interviews. You can set up a mock interview and record yourself answering a mock interview series of questions.

This is so helpful. It’s also probably one of the most painful things you’re going to have to do. And none of us like to hear ourselves talk, really. None of us like to watch ourselves on Zoom and see the
way that we may look off to the side of the screen or gesture with our hands but that is truly invaluable information and feedback for yourself as you prepare for virtual interviews.

So, my most strong recommendation would be to get a little bit uncomfortable in this process and do the hard work, which is to record yourself doing a mock virtual interview and watch that mock virtual interview, take some notes, refine your answers. You don't necessarily want to be so scripted but at least you can cut out some of the things that you do subconsciously or unconsciously during a Zoom-based call, which after three years we've all developed some not-so-great Zoom habits.

**Murphy:** That's a nice little preview. We're going to be covering more interview prep in the coming episodes of the series. I'd like to ask, is there anything we haven't covered in the interview invite arena, maybe some of the prep, the beginning stages of prep, that you'd like to touch on, Dr. Southworth?

**Dr. Southworth:** I think I would just remind everyone that as much as this process is stressful, it is also so exciting and you have all worked so hard to get to this point. Regardless of how many interviews you get, how many interviews you go on and love or hate, you have worked so hard to get here and you're about to enter this amazing next phase of your education and your career, and so every place you interview could be a place where you match, depending on how you rank.

And I encourage you all, as you go through this, to pause even in the stressful moments and just reflect on how far you've come, how exciting this is and that this is really a great time to build camaraderie amongst those who you are interviewing with. Those are your future colleagues. Regardless of where you match, you will run into people in your specialty.

And so, every place you interview at, be respectful. Those will be future people you meet at conferences; you may sit on committees with. They may be your future private practice partner after residency, et cetera. So really just enter this process as a great community-building activity as well, a network-building activity and as much as it's stressful, I hope you all enjoy it and welcome you into the next phase of medical education.

**Murphy:** That is such an interesting commentary and I've heard you say before—Medicine is a team sport, and the people that are in your specialty match aren't your competition. They're your teammates.

**Dr. Southworth:** 100%.

**Murphy:** Well, I think that's all we have today, Dr. Southworth. It was so great to speak to you. For all our listeners, thank you for joining us for this series, “Meet Your Match” on Making the Rounds. It's a podcast by the American Medical Association. I'm AMA senior news writer Brendan Murphy and thank you so much for listening.
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