

Surprises in Applying and Interviewing at Residency Programs in the United States

Robert Ta¹

The Experience

About the Author: Robert graduated from medical school from the University of Dublin in Dublin, Ireland. He will be starting his PGY-1 residency program in anatomical and clinical pathology at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center / Harvard Medical School in Boston.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and clicked on the submit button. Within a few seconds, my residency application was sent to a multitude of institutions across the United States. There were no congratulations, just a surprise credit card transaction pending my approval after the climax of submitting my application. There was a slight relief that evening but the anxiety of waiting for responses from programs came the very next day. Up until this point, preparing my residency application had been quite a stressful endeavour. Gathering letters of recommendation, writing my personal statement, and formatting my curriculum vitae all took substantial effort and time especially during intense summer electives. However, it all paid off when I started to receive interview invitations and I ran into a few surprises along the way.

My journey started in October with my first interview. The day began with some anxiety even though I had practiced answering standard questions such as "tell me about yourself" and "why this specialty?" with a classmate. Unexpectedly, by the third and fourth set of interviews, I felt very much at ease. Questions directed at me felt less like an interrogation and became more of a casual conversation. These discussions allowed me to discover more about the individual sitting across from me and also to learn more about the field I was going to spend the rest of my career in.

At most places, the interview day actually starts at the evening before with a pre-interview dinner with the residents. This was a great opportunity to meet the current residents and ask them about their experiences in the program. The actual interview day usually begins with a breakfast and introductory talk by the program director(s) and followed by several one-on-one faculty interviews. A tour or lunch would come next and sometimes a final wrap-up session to end the day. I was surprised at how difficult it would be to make a fully informed decision on a one-day visit but usually that's all the time we get. For the most part, I really considered my "gut" feeling after the interview day and whether or not I could see myself working with the residents and staff for the next four to five years.

I felt truly honoured to meet world-class physicians who are the leaders in their respective fields but yet astonishingly humble. I knew about them from a distance; I had read their papers, textbooks, and knew they produced hundreds of peer-

reviewed journal articles. However, they were meeting and conversing with me like any one of their own colleagues. We spoke about a variety of topics, anything from their journey through medicine, their family life, to sharing their thoughts on the future of the specialty. I felt extremely lucky and touched that as a medical student I was able to get a chance to meet these leaders within the field.

One surprising aspect of my adventures through the residency interviews was meeting the other applicants. At first, I was anxious to meet the other applicants initially thinking that they were the type A personality, constantly comparing themselves to each other, while trying to edge each other out in a competitive environment. However, I found the opposite to be true. I have met some really friendly and remarkable individuals who really made me happy about my specialty choice. I may end up in the same training program as some of them and without a doubt run into them again at future national conferences or meetings. Ultimately, I would be working alongside these individuals in the future and I consider it an advantage that it was so amazingly easy to make friends with them all.

Another surprise during my travels was the cities that I thought had an undesirable reputation but upon visiting found them to be quite the opposite. Although I grew up in Canada not too far away from the US border, I always heard negative things about certain cities. For instance, Detroit was a great city to visit despite its notoriety for crime. There were certainly pockets of Detroit that felt uneasy (i.e. around the hospital) but then there were other areas where you would feel completely safe walking alone at night. Some other unexpectedly interesting cities were Cleveland (Ohio), Houston (Texas), and Baltimore (Maryland). I would suggest reserving an extra day or two to really explore these cities and see the sights outside of the hospital - you may be pleasantly surprised at what you discover.

Although I was offered many interviews, I was unable to accept and attend them all. In order to help me decide which places to select for an interview, I relied on several sources such as the "Student Doctor" forums, Doximity and current pathology staff and residents (1. Student Doctor Network Forums [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2017 April 16]. Available from: <https://forums.studentdoctor.net/> 2. Doximity [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2016 September 15]. Available from: <https://www.doximity.com/>). However, many

*Editor: Omar Aboshady.
Submission: 2017-01-02
Acceptance: 2017-05-08*

¹ School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin

Correspondence:
Robert Ta
College Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
Email: taro@tcd.ie

of the comments and reviews from forums about programs are out of date and not entirely reliable. For the most part, I used Doximity as a guideline to ranking programs prior to interviews. Additional sources I used were faculty members and current residents. During my electives, speaking to the current first year interns really helped to get an impression of other programs as they had recently completed the interview season less than a year ago. In addition, faculty members offered a tremendous source of knowledge where I was able to gather information about the long-standing reputation of programs over many years.

It is important to mention that the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) recommends that there has been a recent trend of an increasing length of the rank-order-list for applicants. The rank-order-list is the number of programs that an applicant is willing to place on their potential match list. In 2016, all matched applicants ranked 10.46 programs on average while US matched applicants ranked 11.97 programs (Impact of a Rank Order List. National Residency Matching Program, 2017 Available from: <http://www.nrmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Impact-of-Length-of-Rank-Order-List-on-Main-Residency-Match-Results.pdf>. cited 2017 April 18). Thus, selecting and scheduling interviews were a daunting task but gathering information from several sources helped to make

the process much easier. "Would you like to come back for a second look?" At the time, I was uncertain what that meant when I was first asked this question at the end of the interview day. A second look meant that I was able to come back and visit the program at another future date to explore and learn more about their daily practices. At this point, this was the program that I wanted to rank highly so I immediately said yes. The second look day was a very different experience from the interview day. I got a chance to attend conferences, observe many more resident/faculty interactions, and spend more time with the residents. I felt it was a very valuable experience and the visit confirmed my initial impressions to rank this program as my number one.

After completing my interview experiences, my recommendation to future applicants is to keep an open mind about everything that happens during the interview season. As you visit each program, you may "click" with certain faculty, residents, staff or program's philosophy. It is important to understand how each program may or may not fit to your own individual needs. Each applicant should sit down and reflect upon the things that they value most out of their residency training and try their best to match those goals with a potential residency program. By staying flexible, open, and honest about yourself, you may find some positive surprises in unexpected places.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank his family and friends for all their support throughout his medical school journey and in the future for residency training.

Conflict of Interest Statement & Funding

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

Author Contributions

Conception and design the work/idea, write the manuscript, approval of the final version: RT.

Cite as:

Ta R. Surprises in Applying and Interviewing at Residency Programs in the United States. *Int J Med Students*. 2017 Jan-Apr;5(1): 59-60.