



COVID Corner

Association of Surgical Education, Surgery Clerkship Directors Committee Resources

### **A Call to Prevent Excessive Virtual Interviewing**

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Following the Coalition for Physician Accountability's recommendations due to COVID-19, prospective surgical residents will interview entirely virtually for the 2020-2021 residency application cycle.<sup>1</sup> As surgical residencies across the country translate their interview days into a virtual format, we are optimistic that the creative and dedicated approaches programs are taking to showcase their residencies will be successful. However, in-person interviews conducted in the past have also served as a practical limit on the number of interviews an applicant may complete, with a median of 4 declined interviews per matching surgical applicant and past survey data indicating financial and timing issues as top reasons students may decline an interview offer.<sup>2-5</sup> With virtual interviews, applicants will be financially and temporally free to accept far more interviews than ever before, in the context of increasing competitiveness in the match that forebodes of an uncertain 2021 surgical match. Applicants in the 2020 General Surgery Match ranked a record high 13.2 programs on average, had higher applicant metrics in every category, and despite a recent low of just 0.78 US MD senior applicants per categorical position whose first choice specialty was surgery, over 16% did not match into surgery, and 4 programs went unfilled.<sup>6</sup> The trend towards matching applicants with higher metrics while others go unmatched despite a small applicant pool has occurred before with the Otolaryngology match. Data from previous years and computer models of applicant and program behavior indicate that when applicants interviewed broadly, a small subset of top applicants monopolized interview slots and program rank order lists, resulting in several applicants and programs going unmatched.<sup>7-9</sup>

Historical data may provide insight into how an increase in the number interviews applicants complete due to virtual interviews could impact the 2021 General Surgery Match. Following the assumption that the number of contiguous surgical programs an applicant ranks is analogous to the number of interviews they completed, we may estimate that from 2011 to 2020 the mean number of interviews completed by a matching US MD senior rose an average of 2 interviews per surgical applicant.<sup>6,10</sup> During this time there was also a corresponding redistribution of interviews, with 32% of matching applicants ranking at least 16 surgical programs in 2021 compared with just 12% in 2011. We used this historical change as a model for how interviews redistribute when surgical applicants accept more interview offers, and applied the model to 2020 data to estimate a hypothetical 2021 match. Assuming the same number of total interviews are offered by surgical programs, we estimate matching US MD senior applicants in 2021 ranking a mean of 15.4 surgical programs would result in an additional 98 surgical positions that were filled in 2020 going unmatched (Figure 1). Over 100 positions left unfilled will create unprecedented challenges for the surgical match, may overwhelm the SOAP process, and may threaten interest amongst potential future applicants.

Just as we work to engage virtually with prospective residents, efforts must be made to mitigate excessive interviewing as a consequence of the impending virtual interview season. Suggestions vary, ranging from increasing the number of interview positions offered by program directors, recommended limits on the number of interviews applicants can accept, and the coordination of the release of interview offers on one or two predetermined standardized dates so applicants may prioritize interviewing with their top choice programs rather than broadly accepting interviews on a rolling basis.

#### **References**

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**Figure 1.** Distributions of interviews amongst matching US MD seniors in 2020 and a model redistribution based on historical changes. Mean of 13.2 interviews per matching surgical applicant in 2020 mean of 15.4 interviews per matching applicant in the model.

