

*I've Sent My Application.....
Now What??*



*A Guide to the Residency
Interviewing Process*

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE SELECTION COMMITTEES: TIPS ON SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING

The interview process is an aspect of residency application, which is of primary importance to the prospective house officer. The investments involved in this venture usually include a month of the applicant's time and thousands of dollars in expenses. The outcome of the interview process will have a major effect on the residency program finally selected, and can have implications for the future medical career of the applicant. Because the stakes of this game are so high, it is vital that the interviewee derive the maximum benefit from the investment made.

The applicant should strive to achieve three goals at each institution visited: first, to gather information to help determine the merit of a given residency program; second, to assess the compatibility between the program's philosophy of training and the applicant's career goals; and third, to successfully interview for the residency position.

Ideally, the applicant should be well prepared prior to visiting each institution. One suggested strategy is for the applicant to seek out all faculty and housestaff at MUSC who have personal experience with the residency programs in question before the interview trip. These individuals can be excellent sources of information, since they are in a position to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a given training program from the same perspective as the applicant. Likewise, meeting with any available MUSC housestaff, faculty or alumni at the visited institution may provide similar insights. The Dean's Office has information on MUSC alumni for your use.

Of course, the best sources of information for the prospective house officer are the interns and residents who make up each training program. For the most part, residents should be quite candid and willing to discuss any aspect of their residency program. If they are not, this too can be useful information for the applicant. Pragmatic questions, such as salary, call schedules, moonlighting, etc. and questions pertaining to the strengths and weaknesses of the program may best be directed to residents – occasionally some faculty may take offense at such inquiries but others who do not may provide valuable perspective. Most importantly, the applicant should attempt to determine the general esprit de corps of the housestaff, and whether or not he or she would be happy and fit in well in the same situation.

Other very important sources of information include the institution's faculty and medical students, especially senior students interested in the same specialty. Discussions with applicants from other medical schools who are interviewing at the same time can also be very informative, especially if they are personally familiar with any of the hospitals to which you are applying.

Because there is no hard data available by which one can evaluate the various training programs, the applicant must base his or her decisions on personal observations and word-of mouth information obtained from the sources discussed above. Much of this

type of data is subjective and the applicant must consider the source of the information. While it is understandable that interns are tired and under stress, they should still be able to concretely answer your questions and volunteer positive aspects about their training. It may be useful to attempt to convert subjective observations into objective data by means of an individualized scoring system following each visit. Identify beforehand those aspects of a training program upon which you place most importance and then evaluate each program visited on the same scale (for example 1 “best” to 5 “worst”). Such objective scoring may help as it is sometimes difficult at the end of a long interview trip to recall the specific positive and negative attributes of each residency program.

Ultimately, you may find that your rank decision is based largely on intangible factors – that is, you will like or dislike the various training programs for reasons that you cannot easily identify. The more exposure an applicant has to each institution he or she visits, both in terms of personal observation and word-of-mouth testimonials, the more likely it will be that his or her gut feelings about that training program are accurate.

While it is important for you to get a good feeling for the training program, it is equally important for the selection committee to get a favorable ideal of you. In order to achieve a successful interview, it is first important to identify the goals of the interviewer. Almost universally now, the intense “grill session” is a thing of the past. Selection committees now tend to rely on medical school grades, Medical Student Performance Evaluations (Dean’s Letters) and Letters of Recommendation to base their evaluation of each applicant’s medical competence. The purpose of the interview is for the selection committee to identify the personal characteristics of each applicant, which may determine how he or she will function as a house officer. These attributes are not easy to specify, but include interpersonal skills and abilities to interact with superiors, peers, and subordinates. The interviewer will need to evaluate how he or she thinks the applicant will fit in with the existing housestaff. Some of the more skilled interviewers will make an attempt to judge how the applicant handles pressure and responds to adversity, as this is certainly a valid concern of the selection committee. Thus it is important not only to identify what the interviewer is asking, but why he or she is asking it. Selection committees are seeking integrity and dependability in their house officers; questions should be answered honestly and sincerely.

One vestige of the “grill session” which remains popular among some interviewers is that of having the applicant present an interesting case. It is probably worth the effort to prepare a brief two to three minute case presentation of an interesting patient and to be able to intelligently discuss the pathophysiology and differential diagnosis.

Just as the applicant finds many intangible factors influencing his or her evaluation of each residency program, so the interviewer will base his or her evaluation of each applicant on perceptions not easily identified. A firm handshake, confident manner, and good eye contact can go a long way in this respect. It is certainly important that the applicant be himself or herself, but he or she must do so in a way that puts his or her

best foot forward. Thus, the interviewer will not only be judging what an applicant says, but how he or she says it as well.

The interview process today in general takes the form of a relaxed, low-pressure conversation, and can be quite enjoyable to the applicant and interviewer alike. The prepared applicant who well understands the purpose of the interview process will find that he or she can quite favorably affect his chances of being selected for the residency program of his choice.

Presenting Yourself: Dr. Iverson lists in his book *Getting Into a Residency, A Guide for Medical Students*, five reasons why interviews fail:

1. Inadequate preparation.
2. Applicant does not listen to the questions being asked.
3. Interviewers may get annoyed by having questions answered that were not asked.
4. Rambling, providing superfluous information.
5. Applicant inadvertently gives warning signals to the interviewer (inconsistent answers, abrasiveness, evasiveness, blaming others for applicant's problems, dullness).

The bottom line in the interview is that you have to sell yourself. Keep in mind key personality traits sought by interviewers: drive, motivation, communication skills, energy, determination, confidence, reliability, honesty/integrity, pride, dedication, analytical skills, listening skills. You can include these "key words" into your personal statement and in your responses during the interview

Dress for Success

Appropriate dress is an essential part of any interview. Keep in mind that most interviewers are conservative. Above all, dress in a professionally neat manner.

Men - A two piece suit in a solid color (gray, black or navy). The suit need not be expensive, but should be well cut and tailored. If you do not have a suit, wear a navy blue sport coat and matching slacks. Shirt should be long sleeved and white. Be sure shoes are well polished, wear dark socks. Wear a conservative tie.

Women - Wear a two piece suit with a simple blouse or a well-tailored dress (black suits are not the rule. It is ok to be a little different, just not daring.) Choose low-heeled pumps in a dark or neutral color. Keep jewelry to a minimum. Complete the attire with a small purse or try to do without one. Make sure you take a extra pair of pantyhose as well.

Travel

- If by car:
 - Have it checked for working order or rent
 - Plan route for safety as well as speed
 - May want to invest in cell phone and road service (e.g. AAA)

- If by air:
 - Saturday stays
 - Multiple visits on “one trip”
 - Same carrier to use “awards”
 - Carry on luggage

Travel tips. Driving to interviews, given time constraints, can save money. For trips far away, a travel agent can be very useful for getting the cheapest fare on flights, car rentals, airport parking, and hotels. Be aware that many hotels offer a continental breakfast with the room fee and some residency programs don't provide breakfast at their interviews. Also be aware that some programs will offer discounts at local hotels. Some hotels will even offer a shuttle to/from the airport and to/from the hospital. These are great, because then you don't need to rent a car. Another option is to ask the program if any residents are willing to host applicants. Some programs are receptive, some aren't, but it doesn't hurt to ask. The Dean's office also has a database of past graduates who are willing to offer everything from advice to a place to stay. Go to http://www2.musc.edu/COM/Career_Planing.htm under Help Our Students Travel (HOST). This can save you quite a bit of money.

Materials to Bring On Interview:

- Copies of CV, Personal Statement, application, board scores, extra picture.
- Materials from the program to review the night before.
- Notepad portfolio to take notes on. It is okay, and probably shows organization and interest, to take notes during the presentations. You especially need to write down impressions immediately after the interview because you will soon forget all that you heard. Write down the interviewers names, the residents who took you out to lunch etc. so that you can thank them by name in the follow-up letter.
- Pen (a nice one).
- Money-in case you have to pay for parking or lunch.
- Parking ticket to have validated by the secretary.
- Small snack

Questions to ask faculty:

- Where are your graduates? Where do they come from and where do they go?
- How have the graduates done on the USMLE Step 3 and specialty boards?
- How much didactics? Are the resident's relieved of clinical duties to attend?
- Patient population?
- Is attendance at national/regional conferences encouraged and funded?
- Is this program affiliated with a medical school?

- What teaching responsibilities for medical students are expected of residents?
- If residents have teaching responsibilities, approximately how much time each week is spent with students?
- Is there formal training of residents on how to effectively teach and evaluate medical students?
- Are the clerkship objectives for students shared with the residents?
- Are research opportunities provided to the residents? Is this a required experience?
- Is there a possibility of protected time for research?
- How are residents evaluated?
- Are there other hospitals used for rotations or electives?
- What type of attending backup support is available when residents are on call?
- Are residents assisted in finding a job when training is completed?
- Do residents have any problems finding jobs?
- Do residents moonlight?
- What changes do you see in the program during the next few years?
- Have any residents left the program recently?

Questions to ask residents:

- Starting salary
- Vacation schedule
- What are the positive aspects (strengths) of the program?
- What are the negative aspects (weaknesses) of the program?
- Well prepared for boards? Time to read?
- Electives available?
- Relationship with the other specialties in the hospital.
- Moonlighting? Benefits-meals, health insurance etc.
- Patient load?
- Didactics-taught by faculty or residents? How many resident conferences are required? Is there time to attend conferences?
- Call-schedule, what patients are you responsible for?
- Interaction between residents and faculty?
- Do residents have any problems finding jobs?
- Would you apply here again if given the chance?
- What changes do you see in the future?
- What is the housing situation?
- Where do you park and is it paid for?

Answers to Questions: The following are examples of frequently asked questions during an interview. Though you shouldn't memorize answers, it would be to your advantage to write out your responses so that your responses will be fluent and thought-out.

- Tell me about the patient you learned the most from?

- Why did you apply to this program?
- What are you looking for in a program?
- Why do you want to go into this specialty?
- What do you see as the negative and positive features of this specialty?
- What problems do you think the specialty faces?
- How do you see the delivery of health care evolving?
- What if you don't match?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Can I be happy working in this program and with these people?
- Are there factors that make this city an attractive place for me to live during my residency?
- Will my spouse/partner be happy living in this city? What opportunities are there for my spouse/partner?

Tips for Handling Difficult Questions:

- Brainstorm a list of possible questions you may be asked.
- Concentrate on areas that worry you most, and solicit help in preparing responses.
- Think before responding; there's nothing wrong with pausing briefly first.
- Be brief and respond in a factual way. Don't give more information than is necessary.
- Ask the interviewer to restate the question if you don't understand it. Try to determine what information the interviewer seeks.
- Never fabricate or overstate information.
- Anticipate difficult questions, prepare responses in advance, and rehearse.

Illegal/Inappropriate Questions

The law prohibits some types of questions, which you're not obligated to answer. Restrictions exist to prevent employers from unfairly eliminating you for consideration. Most illegal questions fall into four broad categories:

- disabilities and physical skills
- personal history
- race, ethnicity, or creed
- family and relationship issues

A good rule of thumb is if nothing in your life logically prevents you from doing the job well, then they can't ask about it. How you handle these types of questions is a personal decision. You might choose to answer the question attempting to address the issue the

interviewer is likely concerned about. Try re-phrasing and "bouncing" the question back to the interviewer. Perhaps you could ask the interviewer to explain the question's relevance. Or just refuse to answer the question. Know that there are risks with asking about the relevance or refusing to answer a question. Try to practice a tactful way to phrase your refusal and consider seriously whether you want to work in that environment.

Follow Up

At the end of the interview, inquire whether or not you are expected to communicate again with the residency program director. Some will expect you to contact them if you remain interested in the program while others do not expect further communication prior to the match.

Although many people will make their decisions based on overall impressions, it is a good idea to make some notes immediately following each interview. See the examples following this section for ideas on how to organize your thoughts following an interview.

Promptly after interviewing, send a letter thanking the program director for the opportunity to interview and for any lodging and meals they provided. Be sure to mention the interviewers and the residents by name in your letter. A handwritten thank you letter is appropriate if your handwriting is neat and legible. If not, type follow-up letters to send. After the match, write a letter to those faculty members who wrote your Letters of Recommendation thanking them and informing them of your match.

It is becoming common place for many programs to request that you visit them a second time. While there are no rules against this, it creates an uneven playing field if one applicant can afford to, with time and money, to visit a program for a second time while another cannot. Basic rule of thumb here is – if you are really interested in the program and can take the time and money to go for a second visit, by all means do so. If you cannot, still rank that program according to your interest.

Good luck!!