

Guest Editorial

Observations on the Ongoing Shortage of Academic Dermatologists

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In preparation of a study examining the factors correlated with producing full-time academic dermatologists,¹ I made several observations on the ongoing shortage of academic dermatologists and the current strategies that I presume are intended to reverse the trend. My colleagues and I¹ have suggested that medical programs with a high commitment to research are more likely to produce academic dermatologists. Furthermore, programs that have more rigorous research requirements for residents tend to produce more academic dermatologists. The University of Miami places a strong emphasis on research, both for the faculty and residents, which is reflected in the high number of full-time faculty from the program across the nation.

A journal based at a university with a dermatology residency program is beneficial to the residents. The *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* is based at the University of North Carolina; it is a tremendous learning experience to work with Lowell A. Goldsmith, MD, editor of the journal (E. Long, MD; oral communication; 2004).

Unfortunately, throughout the history of dermatology, many cynics have considered our field to be nonessential.²⁻⁴ One of the best ways to validate our field is to conduct hard-hitting clinical and basic science research, as opposed to ubiquitous case reports. Residents should be taught the importance and conduct of research.⁴ Currently, there appears to be a lack of emphasis on research in dermatology programs.⁵⁻⁷ Without research, our field would stagnate and other fields, such as rheumatology, allergy/immunology, and plastic surgery, may develop therapies and techniques that would benefit our patients. Research is what separates dermatologists from other fields of medicine and other skin healthcare professions. Furthermore, research may be one of the aspects of academics that piques intellectual curiosity and retains more academicians.

I was involved in numerous manuscripts and research projects as I applied for dermatology residency, and these experiences truly sparked an interest in academics. Two early experiences with medical dermatology in medical school and during my internal medicine internship solidified my desire to enter academics.⁸ In my opinion, encouraging medical dermatology and its impact on the quality of life of patients could strike an altruistic cord in residents, prompting them to remember why they entered medical school. Although it probably would not be a popular or even an economically feasible idea, bringing back inpatient dermatology could expose medical students and residents to more dramatic cases of medical dermatology and ingrain the pressing need for more medical dermatologists.⁹⁻¹² The University of Miami; Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota; and New York University are some of the few dermatology residency programs with active inpatient units run by dermatology residents and faculty. Regardless of the methods, without an increase in interest in medical dermatology, dermatology will not exist as the specialty it is today.¹³

Many MD/PhDs are attracted to dermatology.¹⁴ However, dermatology residents, who should have high levels of intellectual curiosity, look negatively at academics because of financial concerns, length of training, research interruption caused by clinical training, and research funding.¹⁵ Prystowsky¹⁶ conducted a survey to determine the percentage of MD/PhD dermatology residents who chose a career in academics. Forty-three of 60 MD/PhDs (27 were residents) associated with a dermatology residency program completed the survey; 34 respondents (80%) stayed in academics.¹⁶ Despite this high percentage, I believe that the percentage is much lower today.

Although there are many endowed faculty positions across the nation, the Ronald O. Perleman Department of Dermatology at New York University is the only endowed dermatology department. Perhaps the department's prestigious status and ability to train

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many academic dermatologists and chairs/chiefs may be related to the comprehensive dermatology training provided by extra funding from the endowment. Although it would be a difficult endeavor, chairs/chiefs should be active in searching for potential endowments for faculty positions or the entire program.

What can dermatology programs, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), and the Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID) do to promote academics? Some dermatology residency programs keep a log of the total number of graduates. As of the end of 2004, the Medical College of Georgia graduated over 100 residents, according to their Web site (105 based on our estimate¹); 6 currently are academic dermatologists.¹⁷ As of the end of 2004, the University of Iowa graduated 151 residents, according to their Web site (151.7 based on our estimate¹); 9 currently are academic dermatologists.¹⁸ I encourage all dermatology programs to keep a log of total graduates, graduates who become full-time faculty, and characteristics of these individuals. If all current programs compile and centralize these data, future trends would be possible to track. In my opinion, the AAD should consider organizing a database with various resident characteristics and then analyze the data to determine factors that are predictive of choosing a career in academics.

The SID has recognized the alarming decline of graduates entering academics and has taken an active role in trying to discover the cause of the decline and how to reverse it. In June 2001, the SID hosted the first annual resident retreat for future physician-scientists.¹⁹ First- and second-year residents met with junior and senior academicians, industry scientists, and patient advocacy group representatives to dispel misconceptions about academics and to serve as mentors for the residents. The SID leaders learned that academic dermatologists need to take a more active role in exposing dermatology residents to the joy and benefits of an academic career. The SID has continued these annual retreats and has proposed a database of variables that will predict an academic career choice.¹⁹ Only with focused concerted efforts may we be able to determine these predictive factors and potentially save the future of academic dermatology.

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