

Letter to the Editor

Decisions in Choosing a Career in Academic Dermatology

Dear *Cutis*[®]:

The growing shortage of academic dermatologists in the United States threatens the future of innovation and leadership in the field of dermatology. We address the current trends in academic dermatology, the role of cosmetics in the field of dermatology, and factors influencing residents in choosing to pursue a career in academia.

Dermatology has been one of the most competitive specialties for US medical school seniors for at least the past several years, as demonstrated in results published by the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS[®]).¹⁻³ Despite the wealth of interest in dermatology, there is a growing shortage of academic dermatologists. This shortage was first identified in 1973 and the percentage of dermatology residents choosing to pursue a career in academics has progressively decreased.⁴ The stimulus of the paucity of academic dermatologists has been speculated. It has been argued that growing interest in cosmetic dermatology has contributed to the decreasing number of academic dermatologists.⁵

The field of cosmetic dermatology is thriving. Cosmetic procedures often are cash for services and thus circumvent the insurance hassles common in a standard medical practice. The demand for cosmetic services increased the number of dermatologic services by 5% to 10% from 1998 to 2003. In just 5 years, from 1994 to 1999, there was an estimated 1.1 million increase in the number of cosmetic procedures performed by dermatologists.⁶ It has been argued that this surge in cosmetic dermatology has attracted a faction of practitioners entering the field of dermatology with the sole intention of practicing cosmetic dermatology exclusively for monetary benefits.⁵ The downside to the lucrative nature of dermatology is it attracts people more interested in the financial aspects than the field itself.

Investigators have scrutinized trends in medicine to uncover factors influencing physicians' decisions to pursue or reject a career in academic dermatology. One inquiry determined that of 130 dermatology residents surveyed, 38 residents (29.0%) initially expressed interest in academic dermatology but subsequently lost interest during their residency. Of these

residents, the reasons for the loss of interest included a disdain for the bureaucracy associated with academic medicine (24/38; 63.2%), salary differential/financial issues (20/38; 52.6%), lack of an effective mentor or role model (19/38; 50.0%), and location or practice environment (10/38; 26.3%).⁷

Another dimension for analysis is factors that influence some residents and not others. A study by Prystowsky⁸ determined that residents who intended to enter private practice had substantially larger debt than those residents proposing to enter academics. A study by Tierney and Kimball⁹ found the mean income of a dermatologist in solo private practice was 32% higher than the mean income of academic dermatologists. A possible solution could be an educational loan forgiveness program for academicians to help lessen this gap and attract more dermatologists to the university.

Regardless of the salary differential, various studies have shown that an interest in academia needs to be meticulously cultivated throughout residency, and many programs are failing to provide this reinforcement.^{7,9,10} In order to rectify the current downward trend and revitalize the field of academic dermatology, residency programs need to focus on the correctable factors influencing residents' decisions, such as providing strong role models who will serve as effective mentors, forgiving educational debts for physicians who choose academics as a career, and eliminating as much of the bureaucracy as possible in an effort to preserve physician autonomy.

Sincerely,
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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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