

# Reducing the Cost of Dermatology Residency Applications: An Applicant's Perspective

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Another Match Day is approaching. Students find themselves paying more each year to apply to one of the most competitive fields, while program directors struggle to sort through hundreds of stellar applications to invite a handful of candidates for interviews. Estimates place the cost of the application process at \$5 million in total for all medical school seniors, or roughly \$10,000 per applicant.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 60% of these costs occur during the interview process.<sup>1,2</sup> In an era in which students routinely graduate medical school with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt, these costs must be addressed as soon as possible.

This problem is not unique to dermatology; otolaryngology, another especially competitive field, has considered various changes to the match process based on applicants' feedback.<sup>3</sup> As an applicant during the 2018-2019 match cycle for dermatology, I offer 2 solutions that are a starting point aimed at streamlining the application process for both applicants and program directors: regional interview coordination and a cap on the number of residency applications.

## Regional Interview Coordination

Regional interview coordination would reduce travel costs and facilitate greater predictability in scheduling clinical rotations. In the current climate, it is not uncommon for applicants to make multiple cross-country round trips in the same week, especially given that the interview season for dermatology, including interviews for preliminary programs, now ranges from mid-October to early February. Although affluent applicants may not be concerned with financial costs of frequent travel, all applicants face travel inconveniences that could be mitigated through regional coordination. For example, an applicant invited

to multiple interviews in the New York City area could reserve a room in a single hotel over a period of several days. During each interview day, he/she could travel back and forth from that accommodation to each institution without needing to bring luggage, worrying about reaching the airport on time, or missing a pre-interview dinner at a program in a faraway city.

Given the amount of coordination required among programs, it may lead to more positive working relationships among regional dermatology programs. One limitation of this approach is that competitive programs may be unwilling to cooperate. If even one program deviates from the interview time frame, it reduces the incentive for others to participate. Programs must be willing to sacrifice short-term autonomy in interview scheduling for their long-term shared interest in reducing the application burden for students, which is known as a commitment problem in game theory, and could be addressed through joint decision-making that incorporates the time frame preferences of all programs as well as binding commitments on interview dates that are decided before the process begins.<sup>4</sup> Another limitation is that inclement weather could affect all regional programs simultaneously. In this case, offering interviews via video conference for affected students may be a solution.

## Capping the Number of Applications

A second method of reducing interview costs would be capping the number of applications. Although matched seniors applied to a median of 72 programs, the Association of American Medical Colleges suggests that dermatology applicants can maximize their return on investment (ie, ratio of interviews to applications) by sending 35 to 55 applications depending on US Medical

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Licensing Examination scores. Attending more than 10 interviews does not meaningfully improve the chance of matching.<sup>5,6</sup>

Programs have limited capacity for interviews and must judiciously allocate invitations based solely on the information provided through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS). Given the competitiveness of dermatology, applicants usually will accept every interview invitation. Therefore, applicants who are not genuinely interested in a program may crowd out others who are interested. In a survey of otolaryngology applicants (N=150), 90.6% of respondents admitted applying to programs in which they had no specific interest, simply to increase their chance of matching.<sup>3</sup> Capping application numbers would force students to apply more selectively and enable residencies to gauge students' true interest more effectively. In contrast to regional interview coordination, this policy change would be easy to enforce. It also may be popular; nearly two-thirds of otolaryngology applicants agreed to a hypothetical cap on residency applications to reduce the burden on students and programs.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative to a hard cap on applications could be restructuring the ERAS application fee to incentivize students to apply to fewer programs. For example, a flat fee might cover application numbers up to the point of diminishing returns, after which the price per application could increase exponentially. This approach would have a similar effect of a hard cap and cause many students to apply to fewer programs; however, one notable drawback is that highly affluent applicants would simply absorb the extra cost and still gain a competitive advantage in applying to more programs, which might further decrease the number of lower-income individuals successfully matching into dermatology.

A benefit of decreased application numbers to program directors would be giving them more time to conduct a holistic review of applicants, rather than attempting to weed out candidates through arbitrary cutoffs for US Medical Licensing Examination scores or Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society membership. The ERAS could allow applicants the option of stating preferences for geographic regions, desired fellowships, areas of research interest, and other intangible metrics. Selection committees could filter their candidate

search by different variables and then look at each candidate holistically.

Limitations of capping application numbers include the risk that such a cap would harm less-competitive applicants while failing to address the primary cost drivers (ie, travel costs). The specific cap number would be controversial and may need to be adjusted higher for special cases such as couples matching and international applicants, thus making a cap seem arbitrary.

## Final Thoughts

The dermatology residency match can be streamlined to the benefit of both applicants and selection committees. Regional interview coordination would reduce both financial and logistical barriers for applicants but may be difficult to enforce without cooperation from multiple programs. Capping the number of applications, either through a hard cap or an increased financial barrier, would be relatively easy to enforce and might empower selection committees to conduct more detailed, holistic reviews of applicants; however, certain types of applicants may find the application limits detrimental to their chances of matching. These policy recommendations are meant to be a starting point for discussion. Streamlining the application process is critical to improving the diversity of dermatology residencies.

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