Primary Care Improves in 2010 Resident Match

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

More U.S. medical students are choosing primary care residencies, according to new data from the National Resident Matching Program.

Interest in family medicine saw a spike in this year's resident match, with 9% more U.S. medical school seniors choosing that specialty than last year. Overall, 2,608 family medicine residency positions were offered this year. Of those, 91.4% were filled, with 44.8% filled by U.S. medical school graduates. The overall fill rate is a record for family medicine and the percentage of U.S. medical graduates matching to the specialty is the highest since 2002, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians.

But the number of U.S. seniors who matched in internal medicine rose only slightly over 2009. This year, 4,999 positions were offered and 99% were filled, 54.5% by U.S. medical graduates. In 2009, 4,922 slots were offered, 98.6% were filled, and 53.5% went to U.S. graduates.

Officials at the American College of Physicians said the small increase is not enough to make a dent in the shortage of primary care physicians. In a statement, the ACP called for reforms to make primary care more attractive to medical students, including increasing Medicare and Medicaid payments to primary care physicians and increased support for primary care training programs.

For family medicine, the upsurge in this year's resident match could signal a turnaround, said Dr. Lori Heim, president of the AAFP. During the past decade, the number of U.S. medical school graduates choosing family medicine fell by half.

Dr. Heim attributed this year's increase in part to the spotlight on family medicine during the debate on health care reform. "In virtually every discussion about improving quality of care, people pointed to the need to rebalance our system on a foundation of primary care," she said in a statement. "Add in the heightened awareness of the patient-centered medical home, and students began to understand that family physicians will be able to practice the kind of medicine they envisioned when they decided to become a doctor."

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But this is just a first step, she said. In order to close the primary care physician gap, schools need to train twice as many family physicians as they are today.

Pediatrics and obstetrics-gynecology both retained their popularity. More than 70% of pediatrics positions were filled by U.S. graduates. In obstetrics-gynecology, more than 77% of slots were filled by U.S. graduates, up from 74% in 2009.

U.S. medical students maintain a strong interest in specialties with a heavy procedural focus, such as neurological surgery, orthopedic surgery, and otolaryngology.

Overall, this was the largest Match Day in the program's history, with 30,543 applicants, up 655 from last year, according to the National Resident Matching Program. The increase included 432 more U.S. medical school seniors than last year. There were more students with osteopathic degrees in this year's match, and more physicians who had previously graduated from medical school. ■

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'The attention given to autoimmune diseases is not nearly proportional to the magnitude of the problem.'

Dr. Noel R. Rose, on the lack of research and treatments for autoimmune diseases, p. 46.