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Pro & Con

Pro: Virtual Fellowship Interviews are Here to Stay

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RESIDENCY AND fellowship interviews are a human endeavor. The interview process is widely viewed as a way to determine whether an applicant is a “good fit” for a program by revealing characteristics that are less evident in the electronic application. Historically, in-person interviews have been an indispensable component of accomplishing this vetting process. COVID-19 has disrupted the job interview process across all industries and has led to a need for video conferencing to replace the in-person interview. This disruptive innovation, of necessity, has had repercussions for medical training programs. As widespread vaccination occurs and institutions consider going back to in-person fellowship interviews, training programs need to carefully consider whether remote interviews should continue to be offered. In this discussion, the authors highlight the advantages of virtual interviews, and explore how best to mitigate some of the disadvantages to this approach.

The first benefit of virtual interviewing to consider is decreased cost. The fiscal impact of virtual interviews clearly has benefits to programs and applicants alike. The Association of American Medical Colleges has determined the median cost of in-person residency interviews to be \$4,000.¹ This number may be higher for those applying to more competitive fellowships, such as the adult cardiothoracic anesthesiology fellowship (ACTA), for which more interviews may be required to secure a position. Although there are no data yet published for ACTA fellowships regarding interview costs, there is ample literature assessing other subspecialties. A review of surgery training programs revealed that the total savings to all applicants for the interview process would total \$9 million US dollars, and the total saved costs to the fellowship programs would be \$5 million.² A plastic surgery program in Indiana found that applicants spent \$587 more for an in-person

interview than for a virtual interview.³ Interestingly, there are studies showing the fiscal benefits of the virtual interview process that predate the pandemic.^{4,5} Shah et al. randomized urology candidates to virtual or in-person interviews and showed significant savings to both the programs and the applicants.⁵ For ACTA fellowships, the authors often recommend that applicants interview with 10 programs to have the best chances of matching. The biggest expense of interviews is travel and lodging, most of which is funded by the applicant. Virtual interviews negate these costs and, thereby, remove fiscal constraints so that applicants can apply more broadly without worrying about the financial impact.

An important component of the cost savings related to virtual interviews is a possible effect on applicant diversity. Studies show that underrepresented minorities incur, on average, more medical school debt than nonunderrepresented minorities students.⁶ The cost savings of virtual interviews may allow students from diverse backgrounds to consider programs farther away from their training program, or fellowships in more remote locations, without the worry of incurring more expense. Increasing cognitive diversity in programs by having access to trainees from diverse backgrounds may be more feasible when travel expenses are taken out of the equation.

Another important consideration is that of time savings. The advantage for trainees and faculty of the virtual interview process is less time away from clinical duties. Shah et al. found that only 10% of those interviewing virtually missed training, as opposed to 30% of the in-person group.⁵ A family medicine program estimated that the virtual process saved a total of 7 days of work each year.⁴ From the perspective of the busy resident, using fewer personal days for traveling to interviews likely would be attractive. From the perspective of training programs, and in an era in which clinical anesthesia training is being chipped away by a multitude of competing interests, fewer missed days of interviewees for travel to interviews is clearly a benefit.

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Although saving time and money is important, the question remains whether a virtual interview provides what is needed to accomplish the goal of finding the right applicant for the right program. An obvious concern with the virtual interview process is the lack of ability for applicants to assess the culture of potential programs and the surrounding city. Admittedly, this is the greatest limitation of the virtual interview process for applicants. However, during the 2021 interview cycle, programs attempted to keep the interview process personal and allow the applicants a glimpse into the culture of their program through virtual means. One surgical program in Toronto had a virtual reception the evening before the formal interview. The virtual reception encouraged informal conversation among applicants, faculty, and current trainees. Small breakout rooms were created to facilitate mingling to imitate the in-person process as much as possible.⁷ Other programs have made in-depth videos and slide shows to give a feel for the program and city. Some programs have created additional virtual “happy hours” and virtual second visits to increase touch points with candidates and enhance personal interactions.⁸

Another significant benefit of virtual interviewing is that it reduces the barrier to accepting an interview offer. However, one phenomenon observed this year with fellowship program interviews is that the collective pool of interviews available in the national pool has been given to the top echelon of candidates. This is leaving more candidates with fewer interview spots, decreasing their chance of matching and potentially increasing the possibility of a program not filling. In order to combat this problem, programs likely will have to tolerate an increased burden of applications from a broader array of residents, as well as provide additional interview spots. Although this adds administrative burden and increases faculty interviewing time, the benefits of having access to residents that programs may not otherwise have access to may be worth the effort. ACTA fellowships appear to have negotiated this well for the 2020 and 2021 interview seasons. According to San

Francisco Match statistics, there was only 1 unfilled ACTA fellowship position of the 238 offered in 2020, and only 2 unfilled positions of the 245 offered in 2021. In addition, the percentage of applicants successfully matching in an ACTA fellowship in 2021 was the highest since the inception of the ACTA fellowship.⁹

Although continued research is required to identify the costs and benefits of virtual interviewing, and further development of solutions is needed to continue to mitigate some of the disadvantages, offering virtual interviews has significant benefits to programs and applicants. The authors believe that ACTA fellowship programs should continue to offer virtual interviews to continue to capitalize on these benefits.

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