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Medical Student Forum

SELECTING A MEDICAL SCHOOL ADVISOR

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Abstract—Having an advisor offers medical students many advantages, including increased likelihood of matching into their top choices. Interestingly, students who choose emergency medicine (EM) as a specialty are more likely to seek advising. However, finding and optimally utilizing an EM faculty advisor is often challenging for the medical student. In this article, we tackle the different ways to seek advising, including the ‘virtual advisor program’ implemented by the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine, the ‘e-Advisor Program’ instigated by the Clerkship Director in EM Group, the ‘member exclusive mentorship program’ of the Emergency Medicine Residency Association, as well as peer-based mentoring. More so, we discuss the consensus recommendations developed by the Student Advising Task Force to guide both students planning to apply to EM and their advisors to ensure high-caliber advising. © 2019 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Keywords—emergency medicine; advising; advisor; medical student; virtual advisor; e-advisor; peer-based mentoring; Student Advising Task Force

INTRODUCTION

For a medical student, the prospect of selecting a specialty can be daunting, not to mention the process of trying to select the best-fitting residency and navigating the Match. A good advisor can make this process much easier.

DISCUSSION

Many medical schools assign an advisor to first-year students. This person can be a great asset in providing opportunities early on, to be involved in clinical care, and to get a glimpse of the advisor’s specialty. Once applicants begin to narrow down the specialties they are interested in pursuing for their career, it is often helpful and even necessary to find an advisor in the chosen specialty. In a survey of students choosing a career in emergency medicine (EM), mentors and role models were ranked as the second most important factor in career choice after lifestyle (1). In fact, when compared with the general prevalence of mentorship among medical school students (50%), mentorship among those who choose EM as a specialty seems to be more prevalent (66%) (2,3).

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Although having a mentor in medical school was not shown to be associated with overall match outcome, an association with a better match outcome was found (i.e., students who had a mentor were more likely to match to one of their top choices) (3).

It is worthwhile to mention that most specialties have a certain amount of pride, even to the point where its specialists or residents may try to dissuade students from considering other specialties. It is important for students to filter information they receive and remember that every specialty has pros and cons. Despite what some will say, there is no single “perfect” specialty. One study in 1998 reported that 57% of students interviewing for an EM residency indicated they had received negative advice from faculty, department heads, and even deans (4). Such negative information was primarily criticism of the specialty itself, rather than comments about a particular student’s qualifications for a career in EM. Examples cited include the applicant being “too good for emergency medicine” and that EM was a field of low prestige. In the same study, only 45% of the respondents were assigned an emergency physician (EP) as their advisor. Of those who did receive advising from an EP, 87% of the advisors were board certified in EM, only 70% had completed an EM residency, and 77% were engaged in EM practice full time. None of the students’ advisors possessed all three attributes. This study has not been repeated since EM has grown and gained increasing prestige in the past decade, but anecdotally, applicants are still often discouraged from pursuing the field (4).

Finding EM faculty who can provide precise advice is often a laborious and burdensome job for students interested in EM as a specialty (5). The first task for applicants when selecting an advisor is determining what they hope to gain from the relationship. Are they looking for someone to shadow? Do they want to be involved with research? Are they hoping to get someone to write a letter of recommendation? Are they interested in learning more about one of the EM subspecialties like toxicology or wilderness medicine? Do they need help narrowing down a list of possible programs for residency? Do they need advice on scheduling fourth-year away rotations or to inquire about what interview season is like? Do they want to ask how many residency programs they should apply for? Or how competitive they are? Do they want an experienced EM faculty member to assess their curriculum vitae and application or to review their personal statement and guide them with that regard? Who should they get letters of recommendation from? And what about those standardized letters of recommendation they will eventually need? Therefore, selecting an effective advisor requires the applicant and advisor’s awareness of the needs, strengths, weaknesses, chal-

lenges, and opportunities specific to each and every candidate considering a residency in EM (6).

EM clerkship directors can be invaluable in pointing students toward a suitable advisor. Additional resources include departmental websites with information about faculty, including research interests and hobbies. Most EPs are excited about students interested in EM and would likely be open to talking to students about the field. It has been noted that “academic emergency physicians aspire to be mentors”; however, sometimes a number of them are challenged to “realistically carve out the time required to adequately meet such aspirations” (7). Accordingly, and because EM faculty schedules are often erratic, e-mail or phone meetings can be a valuable method of communication with EPs when seeking advice or mentorship.

EM applicants often struggle to find advising when their school does not have an EM residency or department of EM. Options include reaching out to nearby residency programs or community physicians, although this latter group may not have up-to-date information to guide a student through the complex process of residency applications. A valuable resource for students considering residency applications in EM are the Emergency Medicine Residency Association (EMRA)/Student Advising Task Force (SATF) advising manuals, which are available online at the EMRA website (<https://www.emra.org/students/advising-resources/student-advising-task-force-advising-resource-list/>). These also contain expert advice for students in unique situations such as those with challenges to successfully matching, such as U.S. Medical License Examination failures, couples matching, or those who are non-U.S. graduates.

The Society for Academic Emergency Medicine implemented an online “virtual advisor program” to enable medical students to access experienced EM faculty career mentors by pairing students to volunteer emergency physicians as advisors (8). Although this program received very positive feedback, it fell into disuse. Ultimately, it was relaunched in 2009 by the Clerkship Director in EM Group (CDEM), as “e-Advisor Program” (9). It is currently active at 10 medical schools that do not have an EM Residency and may be expanded in the future. CDEM states, “Students from such medical schools are traditionally thought to be at a slight disadvantage compared to students from other schools, because they do not have easy access to EM faculty who are intimately involved with the residency application, screening, interview, and rank-listing processes.”

Current EM residents can also be great sources of information about EM as well as the application process (e.g., the “Match,” performance of away rotations) and selection of faculty advisors. Residents may also have insights about other EM programs and may be good

resources to discuss away rotations and the Match. They may also be able to suggest appropriate faculty mentors or advisors. The EMRA also has a member-exclusive mentorship program that matches students with current EM residents. For more information and to apply, students should visit the EMRA website (<http://www.emraforums.org/mentorship.pl>).

Recent studies have been discussing the increasing popularity of peer-based mentoring as opposed to faculty-based mentoring. Peer-based mentoring is gaining popularity mainly for two reasons. The first is the ability of the students to express their emotions more freely to their peers, as opposed to the formal setting with a faculty member. The second reason is the fact that students in faculty-based mentoring tend to present themselves in a way that fits what they think is anticipated of them (10,11). However, advisees should be aware that, although valuable resources, residents may not have true expertise, and students should actively seek to supplement peer information with formal recommendations.

Shadowing and other ED-clinical experiences are invaluable in helping students make specialty decisions. In the applicant's own institution, residents or faculty may be happy to welcome shadowers, although there is significant variation in availability due to local conditions such as volume of learners and space availability. It can, however, be difficult to secure shadowing opportunities outside of one's own institution due to institutional privacy and risk-management concerns.

Investing time to find and establish a good relationship with an advisor will help applicants with future career choices. However, applicants should always remember, as Cicero said, "Nobody can give you wiser advice than yourself." To not get confused trying to follow everyone's advice—ultimately, they must make their own decisions.

Because advisors, particularly in EM, are not easy to find and the quality of advising varies from one mentor to another, the SATF was instituted to enhance the quality of advising during the Council of Residency Directors (CORD) Academic Assembly meeting in 2013. The Task Force, along with CDEM, CORD, EMRA, and the American Academy of Emergency Medicine developed consensus recommendations to guide both students planning to apply to EM and their advisors to ensure "high quality advising." Accordingly, four advising documents were made available: Medical Student Planner, EM

Applicant's Frequently Asked Questions, EM Applying Guide, and EM Medical Student Advisor Resource List. The effectiveness of these documents is yet to be assessed based on upcoming data from the National Resident Matching Program as well as future application cycles (5,12,13).

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