Recruitment Behavior and Program Directors: How Ethical Are Their Perspectives About the Match Process?

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Objective: This study examined family practice residency directors’ perspectives on the 1999 National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) process and identified directors’ expectations for students’ recruitment behavior. Methods: Subjects were the family practice residency program directors. A 22-item written questionnaire was mailed to each director. The questions related to the directors’ perceptions of the following issues: applicants interviewing in more than one specialty, communication initiated by programs or applicants, commitments made to applicants and by applicants, ethical dilemmas faced by the program director, and the NRMP process itself. Descriptive statistics were reported. Results: Only a few of the residency program directors (9.1%) felt that it was ethically wrong for an applicant to interview in more than one specialty. However, most program directors (83%) indicated that the knowledge of an applicant interviewing in more than one specialty had a “significant” negative or “some” negative effect on the applicant’s rank order. Ninety-five percent of program directors indicated that they engage in follow-up communication with applicants following the formal interview. Almost all program directors (98%) reported that at least some applicants contact them following the formal interview to inform them that the program was a “high” or No. 1 rank-order choice. The majority of program directors (94%) felt that the NRMP process placed their program in the position of having to be dishonest with applicants to match their top choices. Conclusions: The results of the study indicate that the actions of many program directors and applicants may not be consistent with the written policies of the NRMP.

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Recent research by Anderson et al1 indicates that applicants applying to residency programs in all types of medical specialties, not only family practice, perceive that residency programs engage in questionable ethical practices during the recruitment and matching process. These practices include making informal commitments and lying to applicants, as well as encouraging the applicants to engage in unethical behavior. Further, the authors’ findings demonstrate that the NRMP handbook rules,2 which state that neither programs nor applicants “must ask the other to make a commitment as to how one will be ranked before the Match,” are being broken by both applicants and programs.

Given the research indicating that applicants to all medical specialties face ethical dilemmas during the Match process, we were interested in examining family practice residency directors’ perspectives on the recruitment and matching process. This study examined family practice residency directors’ perspectives on the 1999 Match process to identify directors’ expectations for students’ recruitment behavior, especially in regard to formal and informal communication between students and programs.

Methods

The subjects for this study were family practice residency program directors identified through the American Academy of Family Physicians directory.3 A 22-item written questionnaire was mailed to each program director within a few days of the 1999 Match results. Although responses were anonymous and confidential, a respondent identification number was located on each questionnaire to distinguish respondents from nonrespondents for the purpose of questionnaire follow-up only. A second mailing was sent to nonrespondents.

The questionnaire was designed by a research team (that included program directors) that had also conducted a similar study with fourth-year medical students.4 Questions were designed based on a literature review, issues of importance to applicants and program directors based on results of the earlier study, and the experience of the program directors on the research
team. In addition, the questionnaire was pilot tested with program directors; through this pilot test, alterations were made to the final questionnaire so that it reflected issues of importance to program directors. No scales were constructed for the study; thus, reliability coefficients (Chronbach’s alpha) were not computed.

Questions related to the directors’ perceptions of the following issues: 1) applicants interviewing in more than one specialty, 2) communication initiated by programs or applicants, 3) commitments made to applicants and by applicants, 4) ethical dilemmas faced by the program director, and 5) the Match process itself. In addition, questions were asked about the number of years the respondent had been a program director, the number of positions offered, and the number of individuals who applied during the 1999 Match. Multiple types of question structure were used in the survey. There were 4 open-ended questions, 14 close-ended questions with ordered-answer choices, 6 close-ended questions with unordered-answer choices, and 6 partially close-ended questions.

Analyses were performed using the extended version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Windows, Release 6.1). Descriptive statistics were performed on each item to calculate frequency of responses; given that the purpose of the study was descriptive, additional analyses were not performed.

Results

A total of 351 residency directors responded to the survey, yielding a 75% response rate. The average term of the responding residency directors was 5.92 (+5.02) years. On average, programs offered 7.66 (+2.82) first-year categorical positions and interviewed 58.14 (+36.90) total applicants. Twenty-two percent of program directors indicated that they offer contracts to first-year applicants outside of the Match. More than 80% of the program directors indicated that less than 50% of matched categorical applicants had rotated through the department or were otherwise familiar to the director prior to residency interviews.

With respect to applicants interviewing in more than one specialty, only a few of the residency program directors (9.1%) felt that it was ethically wrong for an applicant to interview in more than one specialty. However, most program directors (83%) indicated that the knowledge of an applicant interviewing in more than one specialty had a “significant” negative or “some” negative effect on the applicant’s rank order. Couples Match issues, applicant indecision on field of interest, and applicant need to match in a specific geographic region were considered legitimate reasons for interviewing in more than one specialty by more than half of the directors responding.

Ninety-five percent of program directors indicated that they engage in follow-up communication with applicants following the formal interview; 59% of programs communicate with every applicant and 36% of programs with selected applicants only. The primary purpose in sending follow-up communication was to recruit the student (62% of programs). Most programs (82%) tell at least some applicants to keep in touch with the director/program if they are interested in matching with the program. Other reasons reported for communicating with applicants were courtesy (29.3%) and a belief that this was the applicant’s expectation (3.3%).

Almost all program directors (98%) reported that at least some applicants contact them following the formal interview to inform them that the program was a “high” or No. 1 rank-order choice. In general, most program directors (84%) were either skeptical or didn’t believe the applicant. Sixty-four percent of program directors reported that this information did not affect their rank-order decision.

Sixty percent of the program directors reported that applicants asked how the program was ranking them (Table 1). If an applicant was likely to be ranked highly by the program, then the applicant was given an honest or a vague yet positive response by a majority of directors (76%). If an applicant was likely to be ranked low on the list, then the applicant was given an honest or a vague yet negative response by 29% of directors and a vague but positive response by 30% of directors. Forty percent of program directors indicated that they would respond to the low-ranked applicant by stating that they were not allowed to tell them.

The majority of program directors (94%) felt that the Match process placed their program in the position of having to be dishonest with applicants to match their top choices. Overwhelmingly, most program directors (91%) felt that they were lied to by applicants at least some of the time. Approximately half of the program directors (47%) felt that “informal” commitments were made to them by applicants. More than 65% of programs failed to match an applicant who they felt made an informal commitment to their program.

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<th>Response</th>
<th>PROGRAM DIRECTORS (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High-ranked Applicant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honestly</td>
<td>21.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vague but positive response</td>
<td>55.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vague but negative response</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lied</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not allowed to tell</td>
<td>23.6</td>
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More than half of the residency program directors felt that the Match process should be changed. Specifically, 52% of program directors indicated that the Match could be improved, 4% indicated that they think the Match is unfair and needs a major overhaul, and 3% responded that the Match should be eliminated. Specific recommendations for change are shown in Table 2.

Discussion

The NRMP provides a system for the confidential ranking and subsequent matching preferences for both applicants to residency programs and for hospitals and graduate medical education (residency) program directors. Over the years, the Match process has developed many explicit, as well as implicit, rules to govern the process. Based on the results of this study, many of these rules are broken, and the behavior of both applicants and program directors often does not meet the ethical standard expected. These results are consistent with other recently reported findings about the Match process.1

Though interviewing in multiple specialties is not a violation of NRMP policies, many family practice residency program directors indicated some reservations regarding applicants who interview in more than one specialty program. While program directors indicated that they did not feel that interviewing in more than one specialty was unethical for applicants, many of them consider such action by an applicant negatively when determining their rank-order list. The reasons behind this apparent contradiction were not studied.

Program directors frequently communicated with applicants following the formal interview. According to the handbook “A Medical Student’s 1999 Guide to Strolling Through the Match,” provided by the American Academy of Family Physicians, students are encouraged to call back for more information.4 One could interpret this statement literally to mean that follow-up communication should be used to provide additional information and not to recruit. However, the program directors in this study indicated that their primary purpose of follow-up communication was to recruit the applicant.

The results of the study also indicate that many program directors’ and applicants’ actions may not be consistent with the highest professional standards necessary to maintain a fair Match process. Specifically, many programs reported that applicants inquire if they will be ranked “high.” Directors indicated inconsistency in their remarks to this specific question. If an applicant was to be ranked highly by the program, many directors replied in a vague yet positive manner. If the applicant was not to be ranked highly by the program, the most-frequent response by directors was to explain to the applicant that the program was not to disclose that information. However, nearly one third of directors gave a vague but positive response.

With respect to communication between applicants and programs, the NRMP handbook2 states:

There is one cardinal rule that both program and applicants must observe: neither must ask the other prior to the Match to make a commitment as to how each will be ranked. It is okay for each party to express a high level of interest in the other. However, references to how each party will rank the other should be avoided and should never be solicited. Neither programs nor applicants should consider these comments about interest as commitments. Candor and honesty are important for both programs and applicants.

As noted in the results of this study, many program directors and applicants do not follow the written policies of the NRMP nor the unwritten spirit of the Match process. Therefore, the results of this study show that the behavior of many program directors appears not to be in concordance with the NRMP policies.

While many family practice residency program directors desire a change in the current Match process, the current system is not being monitored or followed. Future research could examine if adherence to the policies of the NRMP would improve the opinion of program directors.

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REFERENCES