

Postinterview Communications Between Residency Programs and Candidates: What are the Rules?

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The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP or the “Match”) was established to provide an impartial mechanism for matching applicants’ preferences for residency positions with program directors’ preferences for applicants. The NRMP guidelines state that “complete, timely, and accurate exchanges of information are essential to the residency application and matching process.”¹(§4.1) This includes postinterview communication, for which the NRMP has established policies. Previous studies have found that directors and applicants participate in postinterview communication.²⁻⁴ Unfortunately, they may appear to violate NRMP policies and to engage in questionable ethical practices during the match process. In this issue of *JGME*, Curran et al⁵ studied feedback from candidates to determine the extent and nature of post-interview communications between programs and candidates. Their study demonstrated that postinterview communication occurs and, in most cases, is used appropriately and in accordance with NRMP policies.¹

Unfortunately, several factors may encourage misleading or misinterpreted comments in postinterview conversations or communications with residents. Some programs have a limited number of positions, which creates competition among applicants. For other programs, declining numbers of applicants fosters competition between programs to recruit the best candidates. A couple of examples of potentially misleading comments from the NRMP website are “We plan to rank you very high on our list” or “We hope to have the opportunity to work with you in the coming year.”⁶ These comments can be made by program directors to candidates and vice versa. Although both applicants and programs are able to express their interest in each other, this communication should not involve soliciting statements that imply or could be interpreted as a commitment. The NRMP clearly states that doing so is a breach of the applicable Match Participation Agreement for “(a) a program to request applicants to reveal ranking preferences; or (b) an applicant or program to suggest or inform the other that placement on a rank

order list is contingent upon submission of a verbal or written statement indicating ranking preferences....”¹(§6.0)

For program directors and candidates, the appropriate manner in which to state interest in each other is not clear. As noted in the Curran et al⁵ and other studies, most programs send postinterview letters as a matter of courtesy, acknowledging the effort of the candidate to participate in an interview with their program.³ In other studies, the primary purpose in sending follow-up communication was to recruit the candidate.⁴ Conversely, applicants mostly send postinterview letters to help the program remember the applicant or to thank the program.³

In any postinterview communication, the program director and candidate should communicate in a clear and professional manner. As part of any discussion, program directors should clearly remind candidates that any comments do not guarantee a position. Additionally, both programs and applicants should not interpret any statement by the other party to imply that a position is guaranteed to them. Any statement clearly signifying a commitment of a matched position is a violation of NRMP policy and should be reported.

The NRMP should consider further educating participants about their policies and the ethical recruitment of residents and issues pertaining to potentially misleading or misinterpreted comments by either party. The NRMP should also remind participants that statements should not guarantee a position and that participants must understand that such statements are not binding and have no standing when final rank order lists are submitted. Program directors and institutional and medical school officials should avoid making vague or misleading statements, and adhere to a professional code of behavior in their interactions with applicants. Additionally, they should remind candidates that any comment should not be interpreted as a commitment. Applicants should not make misleading statements, should seek to understand the constraints under which programs operate in the Match, and should try not to misinterpret comments from program directors. If applicants have any questions regarding comments made by the program, they should seek advice from their medical school or the NRMP about how to interpret them.

Both parties should realize that a high rank on a list is not a guarantee of a match or position. I frequently remind

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candidates that our program's previous match record does not guarantee future results. Although a specific position on our rank list may have resulted in a match in previous years, that same position on the rank list does not guarantee a successful match this year. To add clarity, I would recommend to the NRMP that neither the program nor the candidate should be allowed to provide a specific rank order or position to the other (ie, the program/candidate is ranked first on our/my list). In previous studies, this type of declarative statement is not always reflected in match results and adds skepticism to the process.³

In conclusion, each party participating in the Match (the NRMP, the program directors, and the candidates) can assist in improving the current process, based on policies already developed. Programs and candidates should be able to continue to provide unsolicited feedback to one another with the clear understanding that any comment

made should not imply or be interpreted to guarantee a position.

References

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