



Education in pathology

# Pathology subspecialty fellowship application reform 2007 to 2010<sup>☆</sup>

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**Summary** The specialty of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine has entered into a phase when the 4-year sequence of Anatomic Pathology and/or Clinical Pathology Residency Training is almost universally followed by 1 or more years of Subspecialty Fellowship Training. Such training may occur in one of the American Board of Pathology-recognized subspecialties or any number of “subspecialty fellowships” that, although not leading to subspecialty board certification, may nevertheless fall under the oversight of the local institutional Graduate Medical Education Committee and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education Review Committee for Pathology. Unlike the application process for first-year Pathology Residency, which is run through the National Resident Matching Program, applications for Subspecialty Pathology Fellowships are not coordinated by any consistent schedule. Competition for Subspecialty Pathology Fellowships has consistently resulted in undesirable drift of the fellowship application process to dates that are unacceptably early for many fellowship applicants. Responding to widespread dissatisfaction voiced by national pathology resident organizations, in 2007, the Association of Pathology Chairs began evaluation and potential intervention in the fellowship application process. Three years of intermittently intense discussion, surveys, and market analysis, have led the Council of the Association of Pathology Chairs to recommend implementation of a Pathology Subspecialty Fellowship Matching program starting in the 2011 to 2012 recruiting year, for those Applicants matriculating in fellowship programs July 2013. We report on the data that informed this decision and discuss the pros and cons that are so keenly felt by the stakeholders in this as-yet-incomplete reform process.

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There are 4 major groups of stakeholders in the debate over Pathology Subspecialty Fellowship Application Reform. The first 2 groups are directly engaged in the application process, namely, Fellowship Applicants (almost always currently enrolled as Pathology Residents at the time of fellowship application) and Pathology Subspecialty Fellowship Program Directors. Two less directly involved stakeholder groups are the Pathology Residency Directors,

whose charge includes successful placement of trainees into their next career positions, and Pathology Department Chairs, who have responsibility for and authority over members of the previous 3 stakeholder groups who are within the purview of the Chair's institution. For Pathology Fellowship Applicants, mechanisms for advocacy at the national level include the activities of the Residents Forum of the College of American Pathologists (CAP-RF) and the Residents Council of the American Society of Clinical Pathology (ASCP-RC), in particular, the various communication by these 2 groups, and their input into survey that is included with the annual Resident In-Service Examination (RISE), administered by the ASCP. For Fellowship Program Directors, the specialty of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine counts over 30 national societies, ranging from those that purport to represent the expanse of Pathology and/or Laboratory Medicine among their members, to those that define their membership narrowly on the basis of subspecialty expertise, practice, and affinity (Table 1). Directors of Pathology Subspecialty Fellowship Programs are well represented among their respective subspecialty societies, suggesting logical forums—albeit disperse—for communication with Fellowship Program Directors in specific subspecialties. Chairs of academic departments of Pathology

and/or Laboratory Medicine have the Association of Pathology Chairs (APC) as one of their venues for leadership and advocacy. In turn, Pathology Residency Program Directors are a well-organized group through their Pathology Residency Program Directors Section (PRODS) of the APC. Fellowship applicants, fellowship program directors, department chairs, and residency program directors are often members of several pathology associations and societies, giving ample opportunities for productive interactions.

In the mid 2000s, anxiety and stress over the application process for Pathology Subspecialty Fellowships emerged as the leading issue for Pathology Residents. The anxiety and stress was apparently exacerbated by the anticipation of the theretofore unprecedented occurrence in 2006 of 2 cohorts of pathology residents emerging from training simultaneously because of a change in credentialing requirements announced by the American Board of Pathology in 2001. Because of the change, the class of residents who began training in 2001, who were obliged to complete a Credentialing Year as a requirement for primary Board certification, and the class of residents who began training in 2002, who did not have the Credentialing Year requirement, found themselves in competition with the earlier year's class for post-residency positions. Residency program directors, appraised by the American Board of Pathology in 2001 of the upcoming change in credentialing requirements, advised their trainees in those cohorts throughout their training of the exigency of timely and expedient fellowship application.

The height of foment was the Spring 2007 meeting of the CAP Residents Forum, specifically at an open, "Town Hall" session. As usual, the dais for the Town Hall was populated by the Chair of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Pathology Review Committee (RC), the Executive Director of the American Board of Pathology (ABP), the Chair of PRODS, the President of CAP, and the President of the APC. At this particular session, these individuals were, respectively, Rebecca Johnson, MD; Betsy Bennett, MD, PhD; Robert Hoffman, MD, PhD; Jared Schwartz, MD, PhD, and James M. Crawford, MD, PhD. The floor microphone was overrun by Pathology Residents expressing their dissatisfaction with the current "system" (or lack thereof) for fellowship application (Table 2). Dr Johnson stated that the jurisdiction

**Table 1** Examples of Pathology Subspecialty Societies relevant to Subspecialty Fellowship Directors

| Society   | Fellowship programming          |
|---|---------------------------------|
| American Society of Cytopathology                           | Cytopathology                   |
| Society for Hematopathology                                 | Hematology *                    |
| American Academy of Dermatology                             | Dermatopathology **             |
| National Association of Medical Examiners                   | Forensic Pathology              |
| Society of Pediatric Pathology Fellowship Directors         | Pediatric Pathology             |
| Society of Neuropathology                                   | Neuropathology                  |
| Association of Directors of Anatomic and Surgical Pathology | Surgical Pathology fellowships  |
| American Association of Blood Bankers                       | Blood Bank/Transfusion Medicine |
| Association of Molecular Pathology                          | Molecular Genetic Pathology **  |
| American Clinical Laboratory Professional Society           | Chemical Pathology              |
| American Society of Microbiology                            | Medical Microbiology            |

\* "Hematology" is the official term used by the American Board of Pathology and the ACGME Pathology Review Committee, for the subspecialty commonly referred to as "Hematopathology." The "Society for Hematopathology" is the official name of the professional society for scientists and physicians specializing in the "clinical, morphological and functional aspects of the hematopoietic and lymphoreticular systems" (per the web-site portal "<http://socforheme.org/>").

\*\* Subspecialties with joint board jurisdiction (Dermatopathology with the American Board of Dermatology; Molecular Genetic Pathology with the American Board of Medical Genetics).

**Table 2** Dissatisfaction with the Pathology Subspecialty Application process, Spring 2007 \*

|  |
|--|
| Inability to obtain current information on Fellowship Program availability             |
| Inconsistent application requirements: Dates and Timing; Application materials         |
| Poorly-defined ethical standards for either Applicants or Fellowship Program Directors |
| Application "Deadline Creep," with earlier-and-earlier offers and acceptances          |

\* College of American Pathologists Resident Forum, "Town Hall".

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