

Surgical Education

The profile of successful applicants for endocrine surgery fellowships: results of a national survey



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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The American Association of Endocrine Surgeons initiated a fellowship match in 2007. The profile of applicants who successfully match into an endocrine surgery (ES) fellowship has not previously been characterized.

METHODS: An institutional review board-approved, web-based survey was distributed to recent and current ES fellows.

RESULTS: The survey response rate was 62% (56/90). The overall mean age was 33 years (standard deviation ± 3), 54% were female, and 37% self-identified as non-white. Only 5% entered their surgical training with the aim of specializing in ES. During residency, respondents were exposed to high volumes of index ES cases. Sixty-two percent had dedicated research time. At the time of fellowship application, the median number of publications was 5 (range, 0 to 25), and 30% of respondents had additional advanced degrees.

CONCLUSION: Entering ES fellows has diverse backgrounds, with strong academic credentials. These data help inform the career mentoring of aspiring ES applicants.

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Endocrine surgery is the discipline that cares for benign and malignant, and functional and nonfunctional, tumors of the thyroid, parathyroids, adrenals, and neuroendocrine

pancreas. Endocrine surgery has evolved into a distinct discipline within the field of general surgery over the last several decades.¹ The American Association of Endocrine Surgeons initiated a formal fellowship match process in 2007. Since that time, interest in endocrine surgery has grown and the number of endocrine surgery fellowship positions has increased from 12 to 25 offered in 2013.

Studies in other specialties have evaluated the characteristics of matched applicants. These studies were able to provide valuable information to aspiring applicants in their respective specialties.²⁻⁷ The profile of applicants who successfully match into an endocrine surgery fellowship has not previously been described.⁸⁻¹⁰ By illustrating the demographics, background, training, and scholarly activities that

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characterize successful applicants matched into endocrine surgery, our aim was to provide a reference for interested applicants and career mentors in endocrine surgery.

Methods

An anonymous web-based survey was distributed to recent and current endocrine surgery fellows (2009 to 2013). This survey was conducted independent of the American Association of Endocrine Surgeons governance. Survey data were collected at the Penn State Hershey Medical Center and managed using Research Electronic Data Capture—a secure, web-based application designed to support data capture for research studies.¹¹ Survey questions addressed demographics, background, training, and scholarly activities at the time of endocrine surgery fellowship application.

Recent and current endocrine surgery fellows were identified through the American Association of Endocrine Surgeons Web site, communication with Endocrine Surgery Fellowship program directors, and personal contacts. Contact information for the distribution of the survey was obtained in the same manner. Excluding those former endocrine surgery fellows with unobtainable, invalid, or outdated e-mail addresses, 90 individuals were identified for survey questionnaire distribution. After initial distribution, 2 follow-up electronic communications were sent to those who had not yet completed the survey.

Before participation, potential respondents were provided information regarding the purpose of the study, its voluntary and anonymous nature, the intent of the data to be used in a research study, and contact information for any inquiries. This study was approved by the Penn State College of Medicine Institutional Review Board.

Results

The survey response rate was 62% (56/90) with approximately equal representation across academic years. Demographics and background information are summarized in Table 1. The mean age was 33 years (standard deviation ± 3). Of the 56 respondents, 54% were female and 37% self-identified as non-white. Thirty percent (30%) had additional advanced degrees (beyond a medical degree) at the time of fellowship application. The most common advanced degrees included Masters of Science or Public Health degrees in 20% of respondents. Two individuals had completed breast fellowships, and 4 were in private or academic practice before endocrine surgery fellowship application. All current and recent endocrine surgery fellows reported matching upon their first attempt, and 96% reported matching into a program in the top 5 of their rank list.

Training characteristics of respondents are summarized in Table 2. Nearly all (95%) respondents were graduates of US allopathic medical schools and 77% trained at a university-based residency program, while another 14% trained at a university-affiliated program. Most respondents

(73%) had formal endocrine surgery faculty at their institution, while only 16% had an endocrine surgery fellowship program. Over three quarters (77%) of successful applicants obtained a letter of recommendation from an American Association of Endocrine Surgeons member. Only 5% entered their surgical training with the aim of specializing in endocrine surgery. During residency, 86% of respondents performed over 20 thyroid surgeries, and 73% performed over 10 parathyroid surgeries. Additionally, 54% had performed 2 to 5 adrenal cases, with another

Table 1 Demographics and background

Variable	(n = 56)
Age (years), mean	33 (± 3)
Sex	
Male	26 (46%)
Female	30 (54%)
Race	
White	35 (63%)
Black	7 (13%)
Asian	10 (18%)
Hispanic	1 (2%)
Other	3 (5%)
Phi Beta Kappa*	12 (23%)
Medical degree	
Allopathic	53 (95%)
Osteopathic	0 (0%)
International	3 (5%)
Alpha Omega Alpha*	14 (26%)
ABSITE \geq 75% in the fourth clinical year*	19 (36%)
Advanced degrees	17 (30%)
PhD	1 (2%)
Masters in Education	2 (4%)
Masters in Public Health	4 (7%)
Masters in Science	7 (13%)
Other degree	3 (5%)
Additional clinical fellowship training	2 (4%)
In practice (private or academic) after residency and before endocrine surgery fellowship	4 (7%)
Endocrine surgery fellowship year	
2009	12 (21%)
2010	12 (21%)
2011	10 (18%)
2012	10 (18%)
2013	12 (21%)
Letter of recommendation from AAES member	43 (77%)
Entered residency with the aim of endocrine surgery as a specialty focus	3 (5%)
Matched into endocrine surgery fellowship at home institution	4 (7%)
Successful endocrine fellowship match at first attempt	56 (100%)
Matched within top 5 of rank list	54 (96%)

AAES = American Association of Endocrine Surgeons; ABSITE = American Board of Surgery In-Service Training Examination; AOA = Alpha Omega Alpha; PBK = Phi Beta Kappa.

*n = 53, 3 respondents without PBK, AOA, or ABSITE at their institutions.

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