ORIGINAL REPORTS

How Informative are the Plastic Surgery Residency Websites to Prospective Applicants?

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OBJECTIVE: To evaluate the comprehensiveness of plastic surgery program websites.

DESIGN: American Medical Association interactive database was accessed for the list of integrated plastic surgery programs, in June 2015. Since then, 67 plastic surgery program websites were accessed and searched for the presence or absence of 31 criteria, which were further grouped into 5 categories: First, program contact information; second, training and research; third, program setup; fourth, benefits and facilities; and fifth, information for applicants. Programs were categorized based on US census bureau designated regions, and number of residency positions available. One-way ANOVA test was used for comparison.

RESULTS: Only 25% (17) program website had information available on more than two-thirds (21 or more of 31) of the criteria. The 3 least factors commonly available by program websites were: operative log (10%), contract (10%), and information on night float (25%). The 3 most commonly available factors included: coordinator information (92%), number of residents (92%), and comprehensive faculty list (88%). Less than 50% of the programs provided information regarding fellowship opportunities, active and previous research projects, and operative logs. There was no difference in amount of information on program websites when analyzed for program size or program geographic location.

CONCLUSION: Programs should consider revising their websites to include aforementioned 31 criteria. This would make applicants and potential resident physicians better informed of the programs before the interview process such that they would be more likely to apply to only those programs that match their specific aspirations. (J Surg Ed ∎:∎∎∎-∎∎∎. © 2016 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: Websites, Residency, Applicant

COMPETENCIES: Medical Knowledge, Patient Care, Practice-Based Learning and Improvement, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Professionalism, Systems-Based Practice

INTRODUCTION

Internet is an invaluable resource for residency applicants, regardless of specialty. It provides easily accessible information, that applicants can use to evaluate which programs fit their individual preferences, and helps facilitate their career goals. Although those applying to plastic surgery programs have not been surveyed specifically, there are several studies that confirm the degree to which applicants across different specialties rely on a program's website, to develop their impression of the residency.[1-3] Gaeta et al. suggest that information regarding the program's curriculum was the most important information, which could be included in a residency website. Furthermore, in the study by Gaeta et al.,[4] nearly 80% of applicants stated that residency's online presence influenced their decision to apply to a particular program. Surprisingly, despite the ubiquitous nature of the internet, several surveys reveal a perceived inadequacy with residency websites, in delivering pertinent information to the applicant.[5-7]

A survey conducted by Sinno et al.[8] revealed that those applying to plastic surgery residencies found factors, such as amount of time spent on general surgery rotations, fellowship placement, case logs, job placement, and prestige of faculty members to be among the most important elements of a program. Program websites are capable of delivering

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this, and also additional relevant information. Our objective was to evaluate the comprehensiveness of plastic surgery program websites with the intent of highlighting potential areas for improvement of residency program websites.

DESIGN

American Medical Association interactive database was accessed for the list of integrated plastic surgery programs in June 2015. A total of 5 aspects of program websites were investigated. First group selected was program contact information. This group comprised 4 subgroups including faculty listing, coordinator information, e-mail contacts and resident listing. Second group was training and research, which further comprised 9 subgroups including information on fellowship, curriculum, year-to-year progression, information on research requirements, active and previous research, message from program director, message from the chairman of the program, operative logs, and recent graduates. Third group was program setup, which had 8 subgroups including night float, number of residents, didactics, intern schedule, plastics rotation, other courses, call schedule, and clinical sites. Fourth group was benefits and facilities, which included 5 subgroups, including parking, meal, salary, educational funds, and description of facilities. Last group was information for applicants, which comprised 5 subgroups including selection criteria, ERAS link, contract, information on visa, and information on the area.

Criteria were selected based on previously published literature from various medical specialties, on contents of residency program websites that were important to applicants.[1-6] Web search was conducted and 67 plastic surgery program websites were accessed, and searched for presence or absence of 31 criteria. This process was repeated 3 times to ensure reliability of the information extracted. Next, programs were categorized based on US census bureau designated regions, namely Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. There were 11 programs in the West, 20 in the South, 20 programs in Midwest, and 6 programs in the Northeast. Lastly, programs were categorized based on their size. There were 14 programs with 1 position per year, 33 programs had 2 positions per year, 12 programs had 3 per year, and 3 programs had 4 positions per year. One-way ANOVA and student's t-test were used for comparison with $p < 0.05$, considered as statistically significant.

RESULTS

Of the 67 programs included in analysis, 1 program website was under construction. Only 25% (17) program websites had information available on more than two-thirds (21 or more of 31) of the criteria. Program contact information was available on more websites (74%) than information regarding training and research (38%), program setup (61%), benefits and facilities (45%), or information for applicants (47%) (p = 0.03) (Table 1). The 3 factors least commonly available on program websites were as follows: operative log (10%), contract (10%), and information on night float (25%). The 3 most commonly available factors included: coordinator information (92%), number of residents (92%), and comprehensive faculty list (88%). Less than 50% programs, provided information regarding fellowship opportunities, year-to-year progression of residents' responsibilities, active and previous research projects, message from program director, message from chairman, operative logs, recent graduates, night float, call schedule, parking, meal and educational funds, and information on visa and area information. There was no difference in amount of information on program websites, when analyzed for program size (p = 0.97) (Table 2) or program geographic location (p = 0.15) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Technology such as internet and mobile devices have revolutionized speed, and reduced cost of communication. It has also affected the quality of communication in a positive way. It is now possible to share information, and connect people from various parts of the world, through publicly available websites. This mode of communication is especially useful during residency application process. Several authors have emphasized on the dependence of residency applicants on the program websites, during the match process.[1] Chu et al. studied the needs of anesthesia residency applicants as well as analyzed the program websites, and concluded that anesthesia residency applicants rely heavily on the program websites throughout the application process, from selection of programs to the formulation of rank list.[1] However, the study highlights the importance of residency websites in the application process. The aim of our study was to critically analyze the plastic surgery program websites, and investigate the potential deficient areas on the websites.

An applicant survey published by Sinno et al. in June 2015 showed that impressions during interviews, experience during away rotations, interaction with residents, time spent on general surgery rotations, case load, prestige of affiliated faculty members, fellowship, and job placement were critical in judging residency programs.[8] Many of these factors can easily be provided by residency program websites, including time spent on general surgery rotations, case load, faculty information, and life after residency.

Applicants have stressed on the time spent in general surgery, as an important factor when considering a plastic surgery residency. This is important, because the amount of time spent on general surgery is highly variable between