



The “Independent” Plastic Surgery Match: Analysis of Changes in Recent Years and Applicant Preferences ☆

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BACKGROUND: The number of surgical applicants to “independent” plastic surgery programs has drastically decreased. However, the competitiveness of recent applicants relative to previous years has not been assessed. The purpose of this study was to analyze the characteristics of recent “independent” applicants and to obtain their preferences regarding the match.

METHODS: A 25-question survey was distributed to 97 applicants of the 2012 “independent” match. The survey consisted of questions regarding demographics, academic qualifications, interview results, match results, program characteristic preferences, interview preferences, and future career plans.

RESULTS: A total of 62 applicants responded; 71% male, 82% US medical graduates, 94% general surgery residents, and 76% in university programs. Three-quarters had ≥ 2 publications and 29% in plastic surgery journals. Applicants most commonly attended 11 to 13 interviews, and 31% got their top choice. Mean rank list position matched was 2.7. Out of 10 program selection criteria, overall training quality and geographic location were most important to applicants. Difficulty of on-call responsibilities and research opportunities were least important. Applicants interested in university-based practice had a significantly higher interest in research ($p = 0.003$). Most prefer one-on-one interviews with 5 sessions being ideal. Two-thirds would prefer regional coordination of interviews. Half were undecided about fellowship, and most were undecided about subspecialty of greatest interest. University-affiliated (39%) and university-based (33%) were the most commonly envisioned future practices.

CONCLUSION: The profile of “independent” plastic surgery applicants has not changed much in recent years. When selecting a program, applicants are looking for the best overall operative training above all else with little regard for difficulty of on-call responsibilities or ability to do research. Applicants are still very moldable in their preference of future career plans with the majority possessing an early interest in academic-related practices. (J Surg Ed 73:1039-1045. © 2016 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: plastic surgery, residency, match, applicants, program directors, education

COMPETENCIES: Systems-Based Practice, Interpersonal and Communication Skills, Practice-Based Learning and Improvement

INTRODUCTION

A total of 3 pathways have historically existed for an applicant to enter the field of plastic surgery. In the traditional model, known as the “independent” pathway, applicants completed 3 to 5 years of general surgery (or equivalent surgical subspecialty) training before entering a plastic surgery training program via the San Francisco (SF) match. Further, 2 pathways (“combined/coordinated” and “integrated”) were later developed in which a senior medical student could match directly into plastic surgery via the National Residency Matching Program. “Combined/coordinated” programs involved 3 years of surgical training under the direction of a general surgery program director followed by 2 or 3 years of training under the direction of a plastic surgery program director in the same institution. “Integrated” programs were then established in which 6 years of training were completed entirely under the direction of a plastic surgery program director.

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Several changes have been made to the structure of plastic surgery residency training in recent years. Per the newest mandates of the American Board of Plastic Surgery, the “combined/coordinated” pathway was eliminated July 1, 2015. Applicants must now complete all 5 years of surgical training before entering plastic surgery (unless transferring within the same institution after 3 years). In addition, the required length of “independent” plastic surgery residency programs has increased from 2 to 3 years, starting with the participants of the 2010 match.¹ Using data from the SF Match website,² Hassanein et al.³ showed that the decline in number of paid registrants and increase in match rate during the interval of 2010 to 2012 compared to 2002 to 2009 was statistically significant. The reasons for this decline have not been clearly identified.

Despite the decrease in number of applicants to “independent” programs, there are no data on whether the profiles of applicants have changed. One of the primary reasons for this uncertainty is the lack of studies analyzing current “independent” applicants. Recent publications have focused mainly on “integrated” applicants⁴⁻¹¹ and program directors^{12,13}. The only other published survey of “independent” applicants is from the match years 2006 to 2008.¹⁴ Thus, it surveys applicants before the aforementioned structural changes in the “independent” model and the coinciding decline in the number of applicants.

In a survey of “independent” program directors, Nguyen and Janis reported that 18% of “independent” programs have dismissed a resident, and 34% have had a resident quit their program within the past 10 years.¹⁵ According to Harper et al.,¹⁴ dissatisfaction with the current application process is higher than desired. Thus, changing the application process to more compatibly match “independent” programs and applicants may be beneficial. The aims of this study were (1) to evaluate if and how applicants of the 2012 “independent” plastic surgery match have changed compared to prior years, and (2) to analyze applicant preferences for selecting a residency program, the interview process, and future career direction to improve the selection process for future years.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The total number of applicants and positions filled in the 2012 “independent” plastic surgery match were obtained

from the SF Match website (Table 1).² There were 167 applicants who initially registered for the 2012 match with an anticipated start date of July 1, 2013. Among those that registered, 110 applicants took the process to completion and eventually submitted rank lists. Those that registered but did not complete the application process were excluded from the study. There were 51 programs that offered 87 positions; however, several of these positions were given to internal candidates who used the SF Match but did not apply to outside programs. All such internal candidates, including residents with the intent of moving into one of their home institution’s plastic surgery positions after the postgraduate year-3 under the new rules of the American Board of Plastic Surgery, were excluded from this study. A total of 97 applicants were identified that met criteria for inclusion. Their email addresses were obtained via applicant lists from various programs. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board with an exempt status.

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire containing 25 multiple-choice questions (Appendix) was emailed to each of the included applicants. The questionnaire was focused on 7 general areas: (1) demographics, (2) academic qualifications, (3) interview results, (4) match results, (5) program characteristic preferences, (6) interview preferences, and (7) future practice preferences. The questionnaire was administered and the data collected electronically using SurveyMonkey (Palo Alto, Calif). Several reminder emails were sent to non-responders at periodic intervals to increase the response rate. Each applicant was emailed a unique link that prevented duplicate responses. Participation was voluntary with no offered incentives. Frequencies and Fisher’s exact tests were used for statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Of the 97 applicants, 62 responded, yielding a response rate of 64%.

Demographics

Most applicants were males (71%). For education and training, 82% graduated from a US medical school and

TABLE 1. Statistics From the Independent Plastic Surgery Match From 2002 to 2012

Match Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Paid registrations	229	241	298	306	284	264	246	201	146	166	167
Rank lists	182	186	232	201	201	173	161	135	103	116	110
Matched applicants	106	108	100	93	93	93	93	98	84	95	86
Percentage matched (%)	63	63	44	48	49	55	57	73	82	83	78
Positions offered	108	110	100	101	94	93	94	101	97	97	87
Positions not filled	2	2	0	1	1	0	1	3	13	2	1

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