

What Residency Applicant IMGs Need to Know When Applying to US Family Medicine Residency Programs

Perry A. Pugno, MD, MPH, CPE; Amy L. McGaha, MD; Alexander Ivanov, MBA; Kaparaboyana Ashok Kumar, MD

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Since 1997, international medical graduates (IMGs) have been a growing population within the entering classes of US family medicine residency programs. In 1997, IMGs made up approximately 14.5% of first-year family medicine residents. In 2009, that percentage had increased to 42.4%.¹

Without a doubt there exists a diversity of perspectives regarding the relative advantages and disadvantages of increasing IMGs in US family medicine residency programs.² IMGs bring to US family medicine programs individuals with widely varying backgrounds, skills, and levels of preparation for clinical practice in the US health system.³⁻⁵ It is natural, therefore, for IMG applicants to have had widely varying experiences and expectations as they seek to enter the US system of graduate medical education.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Division of Medical Education and the IMG Special Constituency leadership have responded to hundreds of related questions from IMGs and participate in many forums and discussions about challenges facing IMG applicants. In the interest of providing the best possible advice to IMG applicants for family medicine residency training, we offer the following recommendations:

Pre-planning

- Be realistic. Recognize that you are competing for a limited number of positions with other applicants who may be more recently trained, better prepared for US clinical work, and have better test scores than you. Residency programs are not obligated to grant interviews to applicants, so you may not get an interview call from some programs.
- Take advantage of every opportunity to improve your language skills and acculturation.
- Contact the US office of the national organization of physicians that represent your particular ethnic or cultural group. This could possibly be your best opportunity for reliable advice, local support, and access to US clinical experiences prior to residency application.

Applying

- Be wary of companies, Web sites, and sales persons who “guarantee” eventual residency placement. There are no guarantees of placement in the application process.
- Participate in the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), www.nrmp.org. It validates your

capacity to be a “mainstream” applicant to residency programs.

- Attend residency fairs such as the one held at the AAFP’s National Conference of Family Medicine Residents and Medical Students, which takes place each summer in Kansas City, MO. (www.aafp.org/online/en/home/cme/aafpcourses/conferences/nc.html) Interacting with faculty and residents in the exhibit area is a great opportunity to speak personally with potential future colleagues.
- Avoid those companies that exploit IMGs, including those that arrange for clerkships and observerships with paid practitioners who provide mediocre clinical exposure and those that “blast” electronic copies of your application to all programs with open positions.
- Make certain that your visa status will permit you to both enter and fully complete your residency training.

From the Division of Medical Education (Drs Pugno and McGaha) and International Activities (Mr Ivanov), American Academy of Family Physicians, Leawood, KS; and Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, TX (Dr Kumar)

- Be aware of restrictions that may prohibit training in an individual program. Some US states will not grant licensure to physicians from certain non-US medical schools.

Interviewing

- Read everything available about any program that grants you an interview.
- Behave professionally with all the people you see, beginning with the receptionist. Everyone evaluates your behavior.

Follow-up

- Respond promptly, completely, and professionally when a program responds to your inquiry or application.

- Make certain that the contact information you provide is both accurate and current.
- Keep trying through yearly applications if necessary, and don't be discouraged. It may take multiple attempts to eventually find the kind of training program that you seek.

The process of residency application is challenging for all applicants, and IMGs have unique additional hurdles to face. Information in the AAFP's *Strolling Through The Match* publication (<http://www.aafp.org/online/etc/medialib/fmig/documents/clinical/matchbook.Par.0001.File.tmp/Strolling10Book.pdf>) can help with many of the questions that IMGs might have.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Address correspondence to Dr Pugno, American Academy of Family Physicians, 11400 Tomahawk Creek Parkway, Leawood, KS 66211. 913-906-6000. Fax: 913-906-6289. ppugno@aafp.org.

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