

Applying for Fellowship

Incoming Wills Eye Hospital fellows share tips for prospective fellowship applicants.

BY EHSAN RAHIMY, MD, WITH JAYANTH SRIDHAR, MD, AND BRYAN HONG, MD

This is an exciting time to be joining the evolving field of retina. With the ongoing medical, surgical, and technological advances being made, this subspecialty is poised to stand at the forefront of cutting-edge medicine for the foreseeable future. As such, it should come as no surprise that a retina fellowship position remains highly coveted and competitive, as evidenced by recent match result statistics (Table 1). In this article, 2 newly minted first-year retina fellows offer their own insights and advice based on their recent application and interview process.



— S.K. Steven Houston III, MD; Ehsan Rahimy, MD; and David Reed, MD

As with any job search, the process of setting yourself up for a smooth and successful fellowship match begins long before the actual interview day. Prior planning and resourceful preparation can go a long way in helping you land with the program that best suits your personality and needs. Below, 2 incoming fellows at Wills Eye Hospital share their insights on the 5 phases of applying for a vitreo-retinal fellowship: the preapplication preparation, the application process itself, the postsubmission stage, the interview circuit, and the postinterview period.

PREAPPLICATION PREPARATION

Get the Inside Scoop

Talk to senior residents from the previous match cycle, especially when they are fresh off the interview circuit. They can offer a wealth of information on the application process, the various programs that exist, travel planning tips, and common pitfalls of the interview day. The pearls they provide will be the most up-to-date information available, so try to take away something from each of these conversations you have.

Find Your Mr. Miyagi

Start talking to your mentors and potential letter writers early. If you do not have a mentor, find one. This should be someone after whom you could potentially model yourself, with whom you feel comfortable sharing your goals, and from whom you can receive constructive criticism. Most attendings are excited to help shape careers of young protégés, and the earlier they know of

your interest in pursuing a retina fellowship, the better quality advice they can offer. Mentors may provide insight as to which fellowships may suit your personality and offer good advice about the idiosyncrasies of programs and their respective faculties, and they usually have tips on how to strengthen your application. Toward the end of the second year of your residency, decide who will write your letters and be sure to make them aware of your interest in pursuing a retina fellowship.

Make Yourself Visible at Meetings

Consider submitting abstracts to present at fall research meetings if your residency program will allow you to go as a presenter. This requires careful planning and preparation. Deadlines for submissions are often in the spring, before you have had a chance to work on your application and while your focus may be on other responsibilities as a senior resident (Table 2). On the other hand, meeting presentations are an excellent opportunity to learn about the field of retina from the experts, to see what is on the horizon, and to network with peers and superiors. Additionally, meeting presentations make for strong additions to a CV.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Getting Started

Register for the San Francisco Matching Program, also known as SF Match, when enrollment opens in June. The \$299 nonrefundable applicant registration fee covers registration, the central application service, and matching. You are permitted to select an initial list with up

TABLE 1. MATCH STATISTICS

Year	Participating programs	Number of positions offered	Number of positions filled	% of positions filled
2010	80	109	102	93.6%
2011	89	121	109	90.1%
2012	89	122	109	89.3%
2013	101	135	114	84.4%

to 8 programs to which you can submit an application at no additional cost. For each additional program you apply to, there is a \$35 distribution fee.

Documentation Scavenger Hunt

Collect all required documents (there are many of them) at the beginning of the application process, and scan them into a private folder for later use. Having electronic copies of undergraduate and medical school transcripts, letters of recommendation (if your letter writers gave you copies), photographs, and scores from the US Medical Licensing Examination and the Ophthalmic Knowledge Assessment Program will be extremely helpful given that different programs require different supplemental information. Because the licensure and credentialing processes at your new institution will also require supplemental information, having these documents in an accessible location will also help with the postmatch process.

How Many Letters?

You are required to submit 3 letters of reference as part of your application package, 1 of which must come from the chair of your department, and another of which must be from a retina faculty member. Given that retina is a small subspecialty, it is wise to have the third letter come from another retina faculty member at your institution. Keep in mind that these may not be the only letters you need. Certain programs require additional letters from other sources, varying from the general (a writer of your choosing) to the specific (a letter from your residency program director). To be on the safe side, plan to obtain 4 to 5 letters for your application.

Timing Is of the Essence

Schedule meetings with your prospective letter writers, including the chair, residency program director, and any other faculty, early in the application process, and give them all the information they will need to write a strong letter (eg, personal statement, updated CV, etc.). Faculty members are often quite busy with other duties (including writing letters for your coresidents) and it may take several weeks for them to complete this task. If you give

TABLE 2. EARLY ABSTRACT SUBMISSION DEADLINES FOR MAJOR OPHTHALMOLOGY MEETINGS

Meeting	Time for abstract submission
Retina Society	Mid March to early April
American Society of Retina Specialists	Mid-to-late March
American Academy of Ophthalmology	April

them ample time, then they will be appreciative and the resulting letter will likely be of a higher quality.

Save Your Inner Author for Another Day

Personal statements should be short, sweet, and to the point, even if you have a book on the *New York Times* best seller list. Explain why you are interested in vitreoretinal surgery and what you hope to gain from your career. Briefly touch on any interesting research projects you have spearheaded or unique experiences from residency that helped set you on this path. When in doubt about whether a statement could be construed as negative, omit it. Remember the adage about personal statements: They rarely help your application, but they can definitely hurt it.

Choosing the Right Fit

Although some individuals may immediately consider program reputation (which is undeniably important) as a deciding factor, the best fellowship for you will be the program most conducive to your training goals and personality. It may be tough to gauge this without actually visiting an institution and getting to know the people working within it, but speaking to your retina attendings and previous residents from your training institution who matched into retina is a great starting point. From there, figure out if geographic considerations will be important to you. It may be difficult, but try to imagine what sort of career you want and consider to which institutions recent graduates of different fellowship programs have gone. Other program characteristics to consider based on your perceived level of importance are listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3. PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS TO CONSIDER

Program reputation	Clinically busy vs academically/research oriented vs balanced.
Geographic location	Significant other/family considerations? Cost of living in that area relative to salary?
Number of fellows	Can range from 1 every 2 years to 3 per year.
Surgical volume	While the total number of cases is important, so is the number of primary cases performed by the fellows.
Subspecialty exposure	Amount of time spent with oncology, uveitis, pediatric retina.
Didactics	Faculty lectures, fluorescein/imaging rounds, journal clubs, surgical conferences.
Call schedule	How is call organized? When do first years start taking primary call? Any buddy call system starting out?
Number of faculty	Ideally, more faculty is better, but having faculty with diverse training backgrounds is just as important, if not more so.
Exposure to ophthalmology residents	Do you like teaching medical students and residents? How much interaction/influence do the retina fellows have with the trainees?
Research	What kind of research infrastructure is in place for fellows to perform clinical/basic science research? Is there helpful ancillary research staff? Are there research fellows?

How Few? How Many?

The number of programs to which you apply depends on your competitiveness as an applicant, how previous residents at your program have matched in recent years, and geographic restrictions. Most applicants apply to a minimum of 10, but how you decide on the number of programs is based on a multitude of factors, such as financial and time constraints. Some people may be flexible regarding where they end up, while others insist on going only to certain programs. Figure out your flexibility and apply accordingly.

Excelling at Excel

Make a spreadsheet with a list of programs that interest you and include important information such as application deadlines, interview dates, positions, program coordinator contact information (e-mail and phone), the number of positions, and any supplemental information the program requires. This information is typically available on SF Match or directly on the program's website. Senior fellows often have prepopulated spreadsheets from their own application processes that they can give you. You should enter interview dates for programs to which you are applying into your personal calendar so you can arrange on-call coverage in advance. This is especially important if your residency program does not grant you excused time for interview days.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Try to submit your applications by the middle of July. Remember that letters of recommendation must be mailed as hard copies to SF Match and hard copies will take time to upload.

POSTSUBMISSION**Buckling Down**

After sending applications out, it is time to switch focus to finishing research items listed on your CV as "in progress" or "in submission." Do not shy away from writing and submitting manuscripts that were not on your application. You can—and should—always carry an updated CV to your interviews.

The Waiting Game

You will likely start hearing back from programs in late August, and most programs send invitations throughout September. As you hear back regarding interview invitations, respond quickly and politely (whether you accept or decline), and make accommodations early.

Decisions, Decisions

Know upfront that many interview dates conflict, and most programs have only 1 interview date. Taken together, you will be forced to choose between 2 potential interviews more often than you might expect. Again, it is prudent to mark your calendar with potential interview dates for all the programs that interest you. This way, you can react quickly to interview invitations via e-mail or phone without too much thought, since dates are usually granted on a first come, first served basis.

INTERVIEW CIRCUIT**Logistics**

Interviews usually begin in early October and end in late November. Be organized about booking flights and lodging. Staying with a friend (especially if he or she is a resident or fellow at the prospective institution who can

offer an inside scoop on a particular program) can be kind to your wallet. Friends may also offer insights about living in that city; alternatively, you could book hotels with colleagues with whom you have traveled along the interview trail to split the cost of travel and make the process more social and enjoyable. Plan to attend as many preinterview and postinterview functions as your schedule permits. The more face time you receive, the greater chance you have to distinguish yourself from the rest of the pack.

Do Your Homework

Before each interview, review your entire application, including your personal statement and CV, and refresh yourself on any research you think you will have to intelligently discuss during the interview. Read about the program and the faculty members who conduct the interviews. Something as simple as knowing you attended the same undergraduate school as the interviewer and cheer for that college football team can set a positive tone for your initial interactions. Know basic things about the program, such as how many fellows it has, who the program chair is, who the program director is, and how the fellowship is generally structured. You will be surprised at how much information is available to the public on the program's website.

The Big Day

On the day of your interview, depart early to give yourself a buffer for unforeseen circumstances, such as traffic delays or getting lost. Avoid flashy colors or shoes: Let your personality stand out, not your outfit. Most of the interviews tend to be rather relaxed, especially compared with residency interviews. Topics of conversation tend to focus on hobbies, longer-term personal and professional goals, CV items, clinical management of patients, and research ideas. Rarely, you may be asked retina knowledge questions. (This is apparently done more to see how you react under stress rather than to assess your clinical intellect.) Remember that on paper you have already made the first round of cuts. The interview is a chance for you to see if the program is a good fit for your personality, and, conversely, for the program to see if you are a good fit for it.

The Interview That Goes Beyond the Interview

Be kind and polite to ancillary staff, secretaries, and fellows with whom you interact during your interview day. Treat everyone with equal respect and importance, as every interaction will have a bearing on how you are perceived.

Straight From the Horse's Mouth

Perhaps the best use of your time is to speak to current retina fellows to get an idea about their daily lives

TABLE 4. MATCH TIMETABLE		
Match deadline	Tuesday, December 9, 2014	Your rank list is due by 12:00 PM pacific time on this date. After this point, your list is locked and no further changes can be made.
Match results	Tuesday, December 16, 2014	Match results are made available to programs, applicants, and US medical schools. Expect a congratulatory call/e-mail from the program to which you matched shortly after.
Postmatch vacancies	Wednesday, December 17, 2014	Any remaining post-match vacancies will be announced on the Immediate Vacancies section of the SF Match website. Contact any programs listed here directly in order to apply.

at their particular institution. How is call? When do they operate? Do attendings pass cases to fellows? What is the balance of supervision versus autonomy? What is a typical working day? Are the residents good to work with? Do the fellows enjoy living in the area? How do the faculty treat the fellows? And, most important, are the fellows genuinely happy?

Dear Diary ...

On the flight home after each interview, consider writing a quick summary of your general impressions regarding the program you just visited. Write down specific pros and cons you noticed. Also, keep a running rank list, and adjust it after each interview. This is extremely helpful because your memories will fade or blend into each other over the number of back-to-back interviews on which you will be going, and any notes you take will be more reliable than your memory when it comes time to consider your thoughts on several institutions.

Show Your Appreciation

Sending thank-you notes at the end of the interview is a nice gesture. In the digital age, e-mails are usually sufficient. You may want to single out the fellowship director/codirector, or any other particularly memorable interviewers you had. Arguably the most important person to thank is the program coordinator, who invested so much time and effort into making the interview day run smoothly. You see only the final product on interview weekend,

but months of preparation have gone into this moment. Make sure to acknowledge this to that individual.

POSTINTERVIEW

Crunch Time

After all interviews are completed, review your notes and draft a preliminary rank list. Plan to sit down with your mentors and letter writers to discuss the pros and cons of your top choices. You may never know it, but a phone call by 1 of your mentors to an institution may make the difference on whether or not you match to a program, so do not hesitate to get those involved who want to help and can help. After meeting with your advisers, finalize your rank list and submit it early. You can revise it at any point until the deadline in early December (Table 4).

XOXO

Letters of intent to rank should be sent with discretion. A wise senior fellow once said, "You can only tell one girl you love her. That's the girl you marry." The retina community is much smaller than you may think, so do not go around telling everyone that they are your favorite. This can only hurt you.

Enjoy the Process

Interview season can seem intimidating and stressful, but it really should not be. You are at this point in your career not because you are lucky, but because you are a hard-working, intelligent, and capable individual. The people you meet on the circuit will become familiar faces, and some have the potential to be your closest friends in the field. You will see each other at regional and national meetings during the ensuing 2 years and throughout your careers. Enjoy the process, and, after the big day has come and passed, get ready for the next exciting chapter of your life. ■

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