

New game, new playing field: plastic surgery interviews in COVID-19

BY MIMI R BORRELLI, LEDIBABARI MILDRED NGAAGE, RONALD K AKIKI, VIKRAM SINHA, ANGIE PAIK AND LOREE KALLIAINEN

COVID-19 has drastically altered social norms. Anyone who dares to shake your hand, step within a two metre radius, or not wear their face mask is awarded disapproving looks. These public health precautions are now impacting plastic surgery residency recruitment, with traditional interviews and sub-internships replaced with virtual meetings. Interviews are important in the courtship between candidates and programmes – both parties put on their best fronts [1] in hopes of achieving their desired match. The recruitment process has culled time-honoured dos and don'ts from applicants past, but as we enter the new era of e-interviews, these tips may no longer be applicable.

While the implications of these changes remain uncertain, we provide a brief overview of our thoughts and answers to some pertinent questions.

What is lost?

- **Sub-internships:** These are often used as on-site interviews. Additionally, they offer an opportunity for applicants to see the nitty-gritty of a programme which are often lost in a formal interview setting. Those without a home plastic surgery residency programme are placed at a disadvantage without this opportunity to meet potential letter-writers and mentors.
- **Rapport and personal connection:** The handshake, eye contact and full-range of human voice are all lost. The interview trail had been a time when many long-lasting friendships had formed.
- **Geographical grounding:** Proximity to significant others or family may be a significant factor for applicants when determining their rank list and on-site visits can leave a lasting impression. Programmes need to get creative in showcasing their locations. The American Council of Academic Plastic Surgeons (ACAPS) is hosting seminars about how to get to know programmes in the COVID-19 era.

- **Weeding out the weird:** Finding a good fit for the programme is paramount when the duration of training is taken into consideration. A month-long sub-internship, the pre-interview welcome reception, and a full day of interviews are instances that lend themselves to discovering applicants' traits (both favourable and unfavourable).

What is gained?

- **Time:** This upcoming round of interviews avoids all time lost to travel. Candidates will be able to gain more sleep, and potentially attend more interviews.
- **Money:** E-interviews are likely to be cheaper. Applicants will not have travel expenses and programmes will not need to provide items like food or drinks.

How to put your best foot forward?

Control what you can control. In addition to usual interview preparation and etiquette, consider the following:

- **Refining your online presence:** Your e-portfolio will likely be scrutinised. Make sure your social media platforms portray you in the way you wish to be seen.
- **Optimising your CV:** A complete and truthful paper representation of yourself is crucial. Highlight academic prowess, accomplishments, research and any other skills.
- **Seeking mentorship:** A strong letter of recommendation has always been an asset but now more than ever, programme faculty will turn to their colleagues at other institutions for opinions. Find someone who will be an advocate for you.
- **Preparing your virtual self:** Invest in a good webcam and microphone, ensure you have high-speed internet, set up good lighting, sit at an acceptable distance, and be sure to look at the right spot for the appearance of 'eye contact'. Practise a virtual interview beforehand.

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Reference

1. Rohrich RJ, Rodriguez ED, Unger JG. How to put your best self forward in plastic surgery residency interviews. *Plast Reconstr Surg* 2016;**137**(1):379-82.

AUTHORS

Mimi R Borrelli MBBS MSc,
Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery,
Rhode Island Hospital, Brown University, Providence,
RI.

Ledibabari Mildred Ngaage MA Cantab MB BChir,
Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery,
Johns Hopkins Hospital, Johns Hopkins University,
Baltimore, Maryland.

Ronald K Akiki BA,
The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown
University, Providence, RI.

Vikram Sinha,
School of Medical Education, King's College London,
Great Maze Pond, London, UK.

Angie M Paik MD
The Buncke Clinic in San Francisco, CA.

Loree Kalliaainen MD,
Department of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery,
Rhode Island Hospital, Brown University, Providence,
RI.

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