



How to Find a Fellowship Webinar Q & A – July 23, 2013

Q: I am interested in [a CP subspecialty] but I don't know very much about this field. What can I do to increase my exposure?

A: It's common for junior residents to lack exposure to Clinical Pathology subspecialties, especially if your AP/CP residency program (like many others) schedules mostly AP rotations in PGY1 & 2 and defers CP rotations until PGY3 & 4. Here are some suggestions on how to increase your exposure to subspecialties that interest you:

- Use your elective months to spend time on the service that you want to learn more about before it's time to apply for fellowships – both internal and external elective rotations will enhance your training and help you decide if that subspecialty is right for you.
- Approach your CP faculty about your potential interest. Ask them about the various CP subspecialties, what a career path in that field might look like, what a fellowship in that field entails, where the good programs are, and what they like or dislike about that subspecialty.
- Ask your faculty about opportunities to get involved in your spare time, e.g. academic meetings, committee meetings, clinico-pathologic conferences.
- Engage in research endeavors: case reports, review papers, CAP NewsPath™ articles, etc.
- Read, read, read! Most general pathology publications (e.g. *CAP TODAY*, *Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine*) provide a vast array of information about almost every AP and CP subject area and immersing yourself in the literature is a great way to find out what engages and inspires you.

Q: For 2015-2016 fellowship positions, most programs have a December 1, 2013 application deadline. When is the best time to submit my application in order to get full consideration for the position? Is there any benefit in applying way in advance of the deadline?

A: It's really never too early to express your interest in a program, so if your application package is ready (CV, recommendation letters, personal statement), it's a good time to send a brief, polite email to the fellowship director and let him/her know that you'd like to apply. **For 2015-2016 positions, it's probably best to get started on this right away so your application package is ready 24 months before the anticipated start date.** Keep in mind that while December 1st may be the official application deadline, there's no guarantee that positions won't fill before that date.

In the absence of a Pathology Fellowship Match or a standardized application timeline, later applications may still receive full consideration from some programs. Essentially, every program has a unique timeline for application: some start interviewing 22 months in advance while others wait until 17-18 months from the start date. Very late interview offers are probably due to a fellowship applicant cancelling/withdrawing their previous acceptance at the last minute (which is highly inadvisable).

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Q: I had a really hectic first year in residency and didn't have a chance to engage in research. Do I still have a chance at securing a desirable fellowship?

A: While research experience and publications are an important aspect of both your residency training and your CV, the absence of such activities during PGY1 doesn't mean that all hope is lost. Many residents don't have a chance to do research until after PGY1 so you are not alone. First, it's not too late to actively seek research opportunities or get started with manageable publications, such as CAP NewsPath™ articles (www.cap.org/newspath), case reports, or Resident Short Review papers (www.archivesofpathology.org). Second, there's a lot more to your fellowship application than your research endeavors, so try to leverage your personal talents into meaningful experiences that will make you a more desirable applicant, e.g.:

- Teach medical students.
- Volunteer for committees, tumor boards, grand rounds – anything that improves your knowledge base and communication skills.
- Seek leadership roles (e.g. Chief resident, CAP Resident Forum delegate)
- Build your professional network – the support of your faculty is essential for a strong fellowship application.

Q: Does an applicant's visa status play a role in the fellowship application process?

A: Each fellowship program has specific eligibility criteria, so if you're not a US citizen/permanent resident, it's a good idea to check the program's website or send a brief, polite email to the program coordinator to ask about visa requirements. While some programs welcome J1 visa holders, others are more stringent, so start researching programs early if you're concerned about eligibility requirements. Also, other non-US residents may have valuable advice for you about J1-friendly programs or how to approach the application process – don't be shy to discuss such issues with residents and pathologists in your professional network. But remember, each program may have its own rules about visas, so **always confirm these rules with each program rather than relying on what you hear from others.**

Q: If my program doesn't allow external elective rotations, would using only one week of my personal leave to visit another program be sufficient? Is one week really better than nothing?

A: Absolutely! A small effort is always better than no effort at all and, as long as you've explained your situation to the host institution and obtained their invitation to visit, try to make the most of however little time you have available. It might really impress a program to know that you are sacrificing your own vacation time for an academic pursuit rather than a trip to the beach or the ski slopes! When visiting another institution, keep in mind the following key points:

- Be punctual, professional, and respectful at all times – this may be your only chance to make an impression before interview season.
- Try to learn as much as you can about the subspecialty and about the program from residents, fellows, and faculty.
- Never EVER bad mouth your own program, colleagues, or faculty – this sort of unprofessional behavior will greatly diminish (if not totally eliminate) your chances of an interview offer despite your impressive CV or medical knowledge.
- If you're concerned about any aspects of visiting a new program or how to interact with people there, **discuss this early on with your program director**, who can probably offer you good advice about how to proceed.

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Q: Besides doing a molecular pathology fellowship, which other subspecialties will provide me with molecular experience?

A: Most large academic programs with onsite molecular testing can probably offer you significant exposure to clinical and practical applications of molecular pathology. If you're really interested in this emerging field but don't want to do a dedicated fellowship, consider asking program directors about combined fellowships (e.g. surgical pathology + molecular or surgical subspecialty pathology + molecular). Most academic fellowships also encourage research during fellowship, so that's another way to incorporate molecular pathology into another subspecialty fellowship training program. Currently, hemepath and soft tissue pathology in particular utilize a lot of molecular in daily practice. Other subspecialties will likely increasingly utilize molecular pathology over time.

Q: What should I do if I haven't yet decided on a subspecialty 24 months in advance? When is it too late to apply?

A: If you're completely undecided about where your interests lie (don't feel bad... you are not alone), it's probably best to hold off on the application process instead of locking yourself in to a fellowship that you don't really want to do. Choosing a subspecialty "by default" is not really fair to either the applicant or the fellowship program. If you're in late PGY2 or PGY3 and you're struggling with this decision, try talking to other professionals about their career choices, which may help you clarify your professional goals, or consider doing a more general fellowship (e.g. surgical pathology or cytopathology) in an area that interests you. Ideally, your applications should be submitted well before the December 1 deadlines... but, realistically, try not to choose a subspecialty based on anxiety about the future. If you are nearing the end of PGY-2 or beginning of PGY-3 and are totally undecided, talk to your program director about this (sooner rather than later). He/she is there to provide guidance in these types of decisions. Plus, it's important that your program director know that one of their residents is having an important (but not uncommon) issue.

Q: What if I want to apply for multiple fellowships at the same institution? Am I allowed to do that?

A: While you're technically allowed to apply for as many fellowships at a single institution as you like, keep in mind that program directors will talk to each other about their applicants, so always BE HONEST. If applying to more than one fellowship at the same institution, make this clear to everyone up front and explain why you're doing it. Also, be transparent about your intentions and goals in your personal statement – it's better to have a single personal statement for each institution than to have a different personal statement for each subspecialty application. Be sure to address the reasons for your multiple applications as clearly and eloquently as possible. If the program's needs and your fellowship plans are compatible, then doing sequential fellowships at the same program may be the ideal solution for all parties.

Here's a somewhat controversial but not uncommon situation: if you're applying for two different subspecialties – one you really want in a competitive field and the other as a backup in case you don't get it – you're covering your bases and that's smart. You're not necessarily obligated to divulge that information but **always be truthful when asked about your applications**. Also, have a better explanation on hand than "I really want this fellowship but I'm just applying to that fellowship as a backup." If you can explain your choices truthfully and eloquently, most (reasonable) program directors won't hold this against you.

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Q: Would taking a year off between residency and fellowship count against me in the application process? How do I explain the gap in my training?

A: As in all applications, honesty is key. It's better to have a continuous training record, but life happens and people take time off for a variety of reasons. As long you address any gaps in your training with a clear, honest explanation, most fellowship directors will assess the other merits of your application and not disqualify you solely based on training gaps.

Q: What if I'm applying off-cycle (e.g., start date after July 1)?

A: This is something you should discuss with fellowship directors early in the application process. If a program is unable to accommodate off-cycle fellows, they'll let you know... and you can move on to the next opportunity.

Q: Do RISE scores influence my fellowship application in any way?

A: RISE scores are confidential and, as such, should not be disseminated as part of the applicant's academic record. Keep in mind, though, that if you do consistently well on the RISE, your residency program director will likely mention your stellar results to fellowship programs. Conversely, if your RISE performance is consistently sub-par, it may influence the tone and content of the letter of recommendation your program director provides for you.

We are not aware of any program that requests RISE score records when applying for fellowship. If you hear of any program that requires RISE scores for either fellowship applications or for promotion to the next year of residency, be sure to pass that information on to the ASCP, as such use of RISE scores would most likely be inappropriate and illicit.

Q: Is a letter of recommendation from my residency program absolutely essential to my fellowship application? What if my program director left the program before application season?

A: While it's not impossible to secure a fellowship offer without a letter from your residency program director, it is certainly very difficult. The absence of your program director's endorsement is a red flag for fellowship programs, which, intuitively, is not really surprising. So, if your program director is unable to provide a letter for you (for whatever reason), be open and honest about this when you submit your application and hopefully your other recommendation letters will carry enough weight to secure an interview offer.

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