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The impact of COVID-19 on the dermatology match: an increase in the number of students matching at home programs

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To the Editor:

During the 2020-2021 National Resident Match Program (NRMP) match, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge in the dermatology match process. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, students were not able to participate in away-rotations unless the student's home medical school did not have an associated dermatology program. Additionally, residency interviews and pre-interview dinners were held virtually via video conference platforms. Given these changes, we explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of students matching at home programs and the associated changes in regionality of the NRMP match process. We defined "home program" as the institution where the student attended medical school.

We obtained data through dermatology program websites and social media accounts for the match process through the past five cycles: 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. The data included 2093 dermatology residents and their associated home medical schools; this represented 82% of the dermatology residents. We excluded 74 residents who graduated from medical schools outside the United States. We categorized regionality according to the United States Census. Logistic regression analysis was performed and a P value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Table 1 shows the total number of dermatology candidates selected, as well as the percentage who matched at their home program and home region (the same region as their medical school), over the past five years. We found students who matched at their home programs varied significantly by year (P=0.0006), but this effect was not present prior to 2021 (P=0.3488). In the 2020-2021 NRMP dermatology match cycle, there was a significant increase in the number of students who matched at home programs (P<0.0001). In 2017-2020, 24.3% of students matched at their home programs. In 2021, this number increased to 33.4% of students matching at their home programs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant rise in the average number of candidates matching at home programs. We suspect given the changes in away-rotations and the interview process associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult for programs and applicants to assess one another based on virtual interviews. Thus, without away rotations and limited face-to-face time, programs were more likely to match internal candidates.

Additionally, we examined the changes in regionality of the dermatology match process during

Table 1. *Percentage of applicants who match at home programs and home regions. The asterisks indicate statistical significance. In 2021, applicants were more likely to match at home programs than prior.*

Year		N	Home Program Match		Home Region Match	
			N	%	N	%
2017	PGY4	450	119	26.4%	260	57.8%
2018	PGY3	449	98	21.8%	272	60.6%
2019	PGY2	459	102	22.2%	265	57.7%
2020	PGY1	337	80	23.7%	194	57.6%
2021	PGY0	398	133	33.4%	249	62.6%
2017 to 2021 (5 levels)			P=0.0006*		P=0.4973	
2017 to 2020 (4 levels)			P=0.3488		P=0.7706	
2017 to 2020 vs 2021 (2 levels)			P<0.0001*		P=0.1344	

PGY, postgraduate year.

the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has demonstrated that students are more likely to match in the region in which they attend medical school [1]. Interestingly, we found that there was not a significant change in the regionality of the dermatology match during COVID-19. From 2017-2020, 58.4% of applicants matched in the same region in which they attended medical school (**Table 1**). In 2021, the average was 62.6% (P=0.1344).

The COVID-19 pandemic ~~has~~ presented challenges to both medical students and residency programs. Subsequently, there was a push for dermatology programs to review applications holistically examining all parts of a student's application. The COVID-19 pandemic ~~has~~ impacted the dermatology match process, increasing the number of home matches during the most recent application cycle. With the hybrid virtual and in-person interviews of the upcoming application cycle, these results are important for both dermatology programs and applicants.

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Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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