

What it takes to get into a General Surgery Residency

By Shirin Towfigh, MD

A word to the wise: Only those who cannot envision doing anything else with their lives should choose surgery. If you can find happiness in any other career, then do not choose surgery.

A few statements I stand by (let's get rid of some myths):

1. It is never too late to choose surgery as a career. Many do not choose until the end of their third year.
2. Though most students who know they are interested in surgery do it as their last rotation in Year III, whether you do surgery first or last has historically had no effect on your grade or outcome.
3. If you are savvy in your rank list, you will likely match in a program. Most don't match because they did not rank enough programs (or the right programs). Be honest about your prospects and have a mentor.
4. The majority of general surgery programs are very good. You will graduate being a good surgeon and you will get a good fellowship or a job.

Now, the facts (from NRMP book, found lying around in the KSOM Student Affairs Office):

In 2004:

- **1,042 of 1,044 general surgery spots were filled.** The remaining 2 spots filled the day after the MATCH.
- Of U.S. grads, **885 matched out of 1,230 applicants (72%)**, the rest were foreign grads. Note that the national average for all specialties is a 93% match rate.
- The average student ranked 12.4 programs. This is too low.

More statistics (from FREIDA, NRMP):

- 253 = number of G-surgery programs
- 5 years + = number of years in training. (May change soon to 4 years +)
- 60% = percentage of graduates to move on to fellowships (an extra 1-3 years)

What you need in your application:

ERAS application

Curriculum Vitae – please make it look professional

Personal Statement – actually pretty important. Most schools include the quality of this in their ranking. Make sure you talk about things that set you apart from others, rather than regurgitating your CV.

Medical School Transcripts – Honors in Surgery and Year III, IV most important. AOA is sought after in most institutions.

Dean's Letter – automatically sent out by KSOM on Nov. 1. Not too helpful, because they all sound the same.

Chairman's Letter of Recommendation – for General Surgery, you must meet with Dr. Demeester after he gets to know you from selective. Interviews are given as a first-come, first-served, so make an appointment as soon as you know you are planning to apply for General Surgery

2 more Letters of Recommendation – must be surgeons who know you well. No Emergency docs or OB-GYNs. Preferably, they should be nationally recognized Professors of surgery, but it's better to get a great letter from an Assistant Professor than a so-so letter from a Professor.

USMLE Scores – Part I is mandatory. Part II is not. Do not stress about taking Part II early... we rarely see it in the applications and when we do, it rarely improves the application beyond Part I. Scores below 200 will hurt your application, 200-220 is okay for middle tier programs; over 220 is a must for top tier programs.

*****The Ideal Timeline *****

For the General Surgery-Bound Medical Student

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- Year I, II - Do well in your studies. Honors is preferred, but not as crucial as your clinical years. AOA is important.
- Summer of Year I/II - Do a summer research project. Funding available at KSOM. Check out SSIG website and Student Clerkship website for list of research opportunities in the department. Basic science research is always preferred over clinical research. Most important is to actually present your research and publish it. The research subject is not so important.
- Year II - Take USMLE Part I. Scores over 200 necessary for most good programs; over 220 for top tier programs.
- Year III - Get Honors in as many clinical rotations as possible, including Surgery.
- Let attendings and residents know you are interested in surgery.
- Get involved in some clinical research projects.
- Find a mentor.
- Sign up for Thoracic/Foregut 4th year selective after February 1st. This is mandatory to get a Chairman's letter.
- Secure an appointment with Dr. Demeester to interview you for your letter or recommendation (323-442-5921).
- Sign up for 4th year away rotation at a program in which you want to match. Most begin accepting applications around May. Something to think about... Many programs automatically offer you an interview as a courtesy for having spent the time in their program. Hmmm!
- Year IV - Sign up for ERAS after August 15. Work on your application. Try to get it in the minute applications open, which is September 1st. Don't wait until the deadline, November 1st.
- Ask for letters of recommendation from 2 surgical attendings and the Chairman.
- Do Thoracic/Foregut (and any other rotation for which you plan to get a letter of recommendation) any time before the letter of rec deadline of November 1. Secure an appointment with Dr. Demeester to interview you for your letter of recommendation (323-442-5921)
- Do 4th year away rotation (in a program in which you want to match) as close to interview dates as possible, usually September, October, and November.
- December and January are for interviews. Choose easier 4th year electives here.
- Spend the rest of the year enjoying your time. Do electives you would not otherwise do in your life, such as radiology, CCU, clinical pathology, forensics, acupuncture, whatever.
- Turn in match list in February. Rank 15-70 places. Match date is in March. Good luck!!!
- If you don't match, you will be notified the day before so you can "scramble" for open spots.

Useful websites:

- www.aamc.org
- www.nrmp.org
- www.facs.org
- www.scutwork.com
- ERAS www.aamc.org/students/eras/start.htm
- FREIDA www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2997.html
- AWS www.womensurgeons.org

SURGERY

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<http://www.ama-asn.org/ama/pub/category/7475.html#Surgery>