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Not so fast on virtual interviewing

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Interview day serves as a key step in assessing applicant qualifications for medicine residency.<sup>1,2</sup> During the 2020-21 match season, the traditional in-person interview process was transformed into a virtual one due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent guidelines ensure that remote interviewing will be relied upon nearly exclusively among United States medical training programs for the foreseeable future.<sup>3</sup>

The change has generally been well received – particularly in relation to cost, equity and logistics.<sup>2-7</sup> However, studies which have focused on the ability of programs to evaluate the strength of particular applicant-attributes paint a different picture. In a national survey of residency program directors from a variety of specialties, most were less confident in assessing an applicant's professionalism (60%) and interpersonal skills (61%) using a virtual platform, and (44%) found it challenging to assess an applicant's "fit," while 74%

found it challenging to gauge an applicant's interest in their program.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, among internal medicine program directors, most rated virtual interviewing (disadvantageous v advantageous) in relation to assessing an applicant's competency (55% v 2.5%), interpersonal skills/alignment with interview team (66% v 7%) and interest/understanding of the program (67% v 8%).<sup>8</sup> In a survey of faculty-interviewers at our training program following the 20-21 season, ratings were significantly higher ( $\geq 8$  of 10) for their ability to make assessments in-person in nearly all domains. Differences in ratings between in person versus virtual interviewing were most pronounced in relation to soft-skills: communication (86% v 50%), attitude (73% v 59%), humanism (55% v 26%), professionalism (50% v 27%) and interactions with others (41% v 11%). Overall satisfaction with in-person interviewing was also higher (77% v 48%). See Table

In terms of ranking applicants, program directors (PD's) in internal medicine have weighed most heavily interpersonal skills and interactions between applicants, faculty and house staff.<sup>2</sup> Those attributes PD's most closely associated with resident success were professionalism, quality of patient care and clinical competency.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the soft skills found to be particularly valuable are also among the most difficult to remediate when deficient or lacking during residency.<sup>10</sup> As the interview day plays a particularly prominent role in assessing such soft skills, the movement to conduct all interviews remotely has potential long-term implications for the future physician pool.

Despite the numerous and clear benefits of virtual interviewing, the long-term effects of this sea change on graduate training are not well understood.<sup>11</sup> Or as the Alliance for

Academic Internal Medicine guidelines acknowledge, some implications of all-virtual interviews warrant further evaluation.<sup>3</sup>

As information technology assumes a more dominant role in the practice of medicine, from interview day onward, we believe that the words Frances Peabody remain true, “One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”<sup>12</sup> A reduced ability of interviewers to identify applicants with this attribute may be the Achilles heel of virtual interviewing.

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**Table:**  
**Faculty Assessment of Virtual compared to In-Person Interviewing**

Survey Item	Format	N	Range	Med (IQR)		Top 3 box, Count (%)	Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	
							Z	P
Overall satisfaction	In-Person	22	6-10	8	(7.75-9.3)	17 (77)	-2.96	0.003
	Virtual	27	4-10	7	(6-8)	13 (48)		
<b>Ability to assess or rate the following:</b>								
Clinical competence	In-Person	22	5-10	7	(6.75-8.3)	10 (45)	-2.59	0.01
	Virtual	27	2-10	7	(6-8)	10 (37)		
Intellect	In-Person	22	7-10	8	(7-9)	15 (68)	-3.07	0.002
	Virtual	26	5-10	8	(7-8)	15 (58)		
Humanistic traits	In-Person	22	3-10	8	(7-9)	12 (55)	-2.85	0.004
	Virtual	27	3-10	7	(6-8)	7 (26)		
Communication skills	In-Person	21	7-10	9	(8-9)	18 (86)	-3.31	0.001
	Virtual	26	5-10	7.5	(7-8)	13 (50)		
Accepted norms	In-Person	21	6-10	8	(7-9)	14 (48)	-3.37	0.001
	Virtual	26	4-10	7	(6-8)	10 (38)		
Interactions with others	In-Person	22	3-10	7	(5.8-8)	9 (41)	-3.74	<0.001
	Virtual	27	1-9	3	(1-7)	3 (11)		
Relationships with letter writers	In-Person	21	4-10	7	(6.5-8)	8 (38)	-1.29	0.197
	Virtual	26	1-10	7	(6.75-8.3)	10 (39)		
Professionalism	In-Person	22	5-10	7.5	(7-9.3)	11 (50)	-3.13	0.002
	Virtual	26	1-10	6	(7-8)	7 (27)		
Dependability	In-Person	21	2-10	7	(5.5-8)	7 (33)	-2.40	0.016
	Virtual	25	1-10	6	(4.5-7.5)	6 (24)		
Attitude	In-Person	22	7-10	8	(7-9.3)	16 (73)	-3.38	0.001
	Virtual	27	4-10	8	(7-8)	16 (59)		

Rating scale: (10 Maximally Satisfied, 1 Minimally Satisfied); "Top 3 box" refers to ratings of 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale; Abbreviations: IQR – interquartile range