

Six tips for acing the residency interview

Written by Wendy Glauser on October 13, 2015 for [The Medical Post](#)

Proper preparation is the key to finding the right position



Before interviews, put together a spreadsheet that compares different aspects of each program you're applying to. This can be used as an important review document.

During the formidable residency interview period, students often fly across the country for multiple interviews, where they're asked about high-stakes ethical and professional situations, fully aware that the program that chooses them—and the one they ultimately choose—can affect the course of their entire careers.

The best way to perform under the pressure and ensure a good match? Be honest, according Irving Gold, who, until this summer was the vice-president of the Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) and is currently the executive director of Resident Doctors of Canada. Though it can be tempting to compose scripted answers that may sound great to the interviewers, such attempts can be see-through or lead to a mismatch based on the interview version of you, rather than the real you. "It's important to be clear and transparent about the type of person you are," said Gold.

Portraying your honest self involves reflection, preparation and stress-reducing techniques. Here are six tips to get the most out of residency placement interviews.

1. Be prepared for the usual questions

When she conducts mock residency position interviews, "the common issue that comes up is a lack of preparation," said Elizabeth Lefebvre, medical student career adviser at McGill University's faculty of medicine. She recommends applicants not only know their CV inside and out, but also go back to their medical school application, to remind themselves of the lofty reasons they wanted to be a doctor. Lefebvre suggests reflecting on experiences applicants have had in their studies that can make telling anecdotes. And

because it can be difficult to do, especially in a perfection-driven culture, students should also be prepared to talk about a time they made a mistake or were criticized. The interviewer wants to see that you handled the criticism in a professional way, or that you learned from a mistake.

Another useful preparation tool is the "Careers in Medicine" website of the Association of American Medical Colleges, which contains articles to guide applicants through tricky questions and stumbling blocks, Lefebvre pointed out.

2. Don't be afraid of silence

Though he has never interviewed doctors for residency positions (CaRMS simply facilitates the matching process, rather than having a say in evaluating applications), Gold has interviewed applicants to CaRMS positions and, he said, "almost always the best interviewees are the ones who take a moment to understand the question and gather their thoughts." So, go ahead and take those 10 seconds to recall a good anecdote or think about your response.

3. It's OK if there isn't a 'right' answer

Residency interview questions can run the gamut from "How do you respond if you think your preceptor is treating a patient inappropriately?" to "What would you do if you're stuck in the wilderness and a bear attacks you?" The interviewer wants to see how applicants think through the issues and whether they're able to recognize the different sides of an argument or multiple outcome possibilities. It may be helpful to talk about the process you would go through in making a decision, rather than to state what your decision would be.

4. Use the CaRMS website to its full potential

It may sound like a no-brainer, but Lefebvre notices her students don't take full advantage of the information available on the CaRMS website. The program descriptions provide information students can use in an interview to explain what they find attractive about the program. In some cases, the programs will even say what interview style they rely on. The CaRMS interview question databank, where students report on what the interview experience was like for a particular specialty or university, can also be extremely helpful.

Lefebvre encourages her students to put together a spreadsheet to compare interview styles, how many letters of reference are needed and program highlights and drawbacks. If you've scheduled a dozen interviews in a month-and Lefebvre doesn't suggest going beyond that-the spreadsheet will be an important review document on planes and buses.

5. Remember, you're also evaluating the program

It may be tempting to ask questions that simply make you look like an attractive candidate, but by doing that you could miss out on an opportunity to evaluate the program. To ensure the right match, your evaluation of the program is just as important as the interviewer's evaluation of you. "You should be asking questions that you legitimately want answers to," said Gold. However, "try not to ask right away about vacations," Lefebvre warned. Instead, it's better to inquire about the kind of educational experience you'll get.



Irving Gold

Applicants may be surprised how easy it is to forget details of past interviews by the time there's been five of them-make note of impressions immediately after the interview. Gold suggested making note of details that "bring you back to that place." By writing down some descriptors of the room or who was present, it's often easier to recall whether you felt the program was a good fit or if something didn't sit right, for example.

6. Reduce your anxiety

Here's a point that should calm your nerves: You're not only allowed to be stressed, but it's expected of you. "The person interviewing you will have seen nothing but nervous people all the time," said Lefebvre. Plus, a little stress is a good thing. "It keeps you vigilant and aware of the importance of the process," added Gold.

That said, given the anxiety already involved, it's important not to add to it. Make sure to get enough sleep, don't worry about what you're going to wear, or stress over running into unanticipated traffic. These are all factors you should leave room for in your schedule. "You want to plan properly so you're not getting off a plane an hour before the interview," explained Gold.

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