Response to: "Reliability of self-reported data on social media vs National Residency Match Program charting outcomes for dermatology applicants"

To the Editor: We read with great interest the recent article, "Reliability of self-reported data on social media vs National Residency Match Program charting outcomes for dermatology applicants" published by Hu et al.[1] The authors describe the dermatology applicant statistics reported on online forums and find that several components are comparable to what is published by the National Residency Match Program (NRMP). While there may be a selection bias towards more successful students or misreporting, this finding suggests that students can reliably access online sources.

However, the authors found a discrepancy for nonboard score statistics, which may be important for the changing applicant selection process. The recent Step 1 change to pass/fail will have an immense impact on the application process and how students are evaluated. This change in Step 1, along with a rise in applications submitted, presents new challenges to the application process.

The Step 1 score has been an important statistic used by residency programs. The average Step 1 score has been increasing over time, as the NRMP reports average scores of 242 in 2009 and 249 in 2018 for matched applicants.[2,3] Residency programs have also increased their expectations regarding applicant scores. According to surveys conducted by NRMP, program directors in participating dermatology programs (n = 21) said that the Step 1 score is among the most commonly cited reasons for acceptance.[4] This survey found that 82% of programs have a target Step 1 score and will not interview applicants with a score of below 230.[4] With the recent change to pass/fail, program directors must find other parameters to evaluate applicants. As mentioned above, non-Step 1 score statistics vary greatly among applicants. The online forums may become more beneficial because students can compare themselves among all of the statistics categories that are not published by NRMP.

Several statistics available on social media platforms that are not reported by NRMP include number of honored rotations, number of dermatology sub-internships, research year, number of programs applied to, and number of interview invites. A national survey of dermatology program directors (n = 94) reported the top criteria for residency selection as the interview, letters of recommendation, Step 1 score, medical school transcript, and clinical rotations.[5] Students may gain a better understanding of their competitiveness by having access to these additional, highly considered statistics in the forums. The ability to compare statistics can aid student decisions such as determining how many applications to submit and whether to take a research year.

We must evaluate the current application process and make appropriate changes for our rising residents. With a pass/fail Step 1, application selection committees need to re-evaluate how they select applicants. Social media platforms provide additional information not available through NRMP. Because the NRMP only posts data every few years, it may be helpful for students to reference online forums in the in-between years. Finally, social platforms may serve as reliable sources for students, and we should expand on this platform to aid in this process.

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