

## Dermatology resident application photos: A trigger of implicit bias?



**Dear Dr Dermatoethicist: Dr Johnson is an academic dermatologist who recently attended a training session on implicit bias at her university. With dermatology residency application season approaching, should she view applicant photos that accompany applications or omit them?**  
—Concerned Dermatologist

**Dear Concerned Dermatologist:** To submit a residency application through the Electronic Residency Application Service, it is mandatory for an applicant to provide a headshot. Although this may seem inconsequential, viewing a headshot can trigger bias in the reviewer of the application.<sup>1</sup> Even when reviewers strive to be objective, the headshot can lead to assumptions about personality, interest, and even likeability based solely on the applicant's physical characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Assumptions as they pertain to favorable or unfavorable attributions are known as implicit bias.

The unconscious attitudes or stereotypes we have about people merely based on how they look can trigger positive or, perhaps more concerning, negative impressions or false assumptions, or both.<sup>2</sup> These assumptions could inadvertently affect an applicant's likelihood of being ranked highly by a program in the context of the residency match or being offered a position by a practice in the context of a job interview.

Despite our conscious efforts, implicit bias affects all people and often is shaped by previous interactions with a certain group, media, or cultural norms.<sup>2</sup> These biases are continually strengthened as we are exposed to these entities and eventually result in an unconscious belief. For example, an analysis by Ana Corcimar, a University of North Carolina dermatology resident, illustrated that particular features of a dermatology applicant's headshot, such as smiling and wearing glasses or a jacket, were associated with a greater likelihood of matching.<sup>3</sup>

When selecting candidates for residency interviews or ranking applicants, residency programs should seek to evaluate those applicants based on factors that are as relevant and objective as possible and minimize triggers of implicit bias. However, even commonly used elements of applications, such as letters of recommendation, research

experiences, and personal interests, may also be triggers of bias.

In 2017, the Association of Professors of Dermatology put forth a call to action to increase the diversity in the field of dermatology.<sup>4</sup> Organizations such as Skin of Color Society and the American Academy of Dermatology have taken the initiative to increase diversity and inclusion in the field of dermatology. Data from the National Resident Matching Program 2018 Charting Outcomes in the Match showed there were 651 applicants for dermatology residency that year. Removing headshots from applications could improve diversity of applicants who receive interviews. Even a small change in the makeup of interviewees could have a large impact on the composition of many residency programs.<sup>5</sup>

We therefore propose that a reasonable first step to minimize implicit bias and, potentially, increase diversity in dermatology would be to eliminate headshots from dermatology residency applications.  
—Dr Dermatoethicist

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