

# Transition to Residency

## The Dean's Letter

The Dean's Letter is a formal document, completed by medical school administrators, that summarizes, for each student, the student's academic achievements, work experiences, and extracurricular activities during medical school. The Dean's Letter is submitted, as part of a package of materials, to those residency programs to which the student has applied. The Dean's Letter is a letter of evaluation rather than a letter of recommendation.

The 1989 AAMC publication, *A Guide to the Preparation of the Medical School Dean's Letter*, provides general advice for drafting the Dean's Letter. In the fall of 2000, AAMC President Jordan Cohen formed a Dean's Letter Advisory Committee, composed of 10 individuals (including a dean, Student Affairs and Academic Affairs officers, a medical student, clerkship directors, and residency program directors), to study and make recommendations about revising the content, format, and timing of the Dean's Letter. The recommendations of this committee are expected by February 2002.

November 1 is the date established by the AAMC Executive Council as the earliest date for the release to a residency program of a Dean's Letter for a currently enrolled senior medical student. For prior year graduates, the Dean's Letter may be released at the time of the request. In all cases, if a student requests that a transcript be sent to a program on a date prior to November 1, the transcript should be mailed immediately and not detained for subsequent inclusion with the Dean's Letter.

At most schools, students are provided with an opportunity to review their Dean's Letters for accuracy. Each student must sign an *Information Release Form*, which gives the school permission to release the Dean's Letter on November 1.

The body of the letter includes the following:

- **Introduction.** The introduction is a succinct chronology of the student's premedical education and entry into, and progress through, medical school. Pre-matriculation academic and employment history and other accomplishments may be included. Irregular progress through medical school (including any leaves of absence) and any required remediation should be indicated and explained. The content of this section is frequently derived from information provided by the student on a school-specific form or during interviews with Dean's Letter-writers.
- **Preclinical Record.** This section describes the student's performance in the

first two years of medical school. While the specifics of a student's grades in individual courses are not detailed, highlights of the student's significant achievements (e.g., honors grades and/or outstanding performance as indicated by course directors) are noted in this narrative.

- **Clinical Clerkship Record.** This section of the letter should describe the student's performance in each of the required clinical clerkships, focusing on the student's knowledge base and data-gathering, analytic-reasoning, and interpersonal skills and including unusual
- accomplishments. Narrative comments from core clinical clerkships are summarized in the chronological order in which the clerkships were completed. Representative comments from elective rotations may also be included.
- **Special Activities.** Report those activities that provide information about the student's talents and activities outside of the required curriculum, including volunteer, community service, leadership, and research experiences.
- **Personal Qualities.** This section should provide the reader with a sense of the student as a person. When necessary, it should include comments about personal limitations of the student.
- **Summary.** Recipients most likely will read this section first. It should, therefore, provide a clear and balanced synopsis of the preceding sections and an overall evaluation of the student as compared with the other members of his/her graduating class.

## **The Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS)**

Introduced in the 1995-96 applicant year, ERAS is an electronic transmittal system for applications for residency. This application and delivery system consists of four components: MyERAS, the applicant web site; the Dean's Office Workstation (DWS) for medical schools; the Program Director's Workstation (PDW) for residency programs; and the ERAS PostOffice. In ERAS, applicants utilize the MyERAS Web site to complete a common application form and personal statements and to select residency programs to receive their application using ERAS software.

All applicants applying to programs using ERAS have access to the service through their designated Dean's Office. Seniors and prior year graduates of U.S. medical schools, including osteopathic schools, apply through the student affairs or academic affairs office at the medical school from which they graduated. Students and graduates of foreign medical schools obtain ERAS materials from, and forward their supporting documents to, the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). Students and graduates of Canadian

medical schools forward ERAS application materials to the Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS).

Once the applicant completes his or her application on the Web, the appropriate Dean's Office Workstation (DWS) is notified. Student affairs staff then scan and attach the student's Dean's Letter, transcript, and faculty letters of recommendation. Software at the Dean's Office Workstation then encrypts the files for security and transmits them to the ERAS PostOffice over the Internet using file transfer protocol (ftp).

Program directors download applications and other documents using the Program Directors Workstation (PDW) from the ERAS PostOffice, based on their own schedule. Each program director uses the PDW to print, review, and evaluate applications using criteria established by the local residency program.

The National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) participates in ERAS by transmitting complete USMLE transcripts to programs as instructed by applicants. ECFMG sends the USMLE transcripts for graduates of foreign medical schools. In addition, for each international medical graduate, ECFMG produces a report that documents the status of the graduate's ECFMG certification. This "Certification Status Report" is updated by ECFMG as new information is available through the year, e.g., verification of diploma or recording a passing score for a USMLE Step examination.

For their students, most schools establish clear procedures and timelines for students to complete residency applications and apply to programs. Ideally, all students will have completed this work by the end of September.

## **The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP)**

The NRMP, often referred to as "the Match," is a private, not-for-profit corporation established in 1952. The NRMP provides a uniform date when all decisions about residency selection are made by both applicants and programs, thereby eliminating pressure on applicants to make choices about where to train before they learn about all of the options available to them in graduate medical education (GME).

Five organizations sponsor the NRMP and appoint members to the board: the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), the American Medical Association (AMA), the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the American Hospital Association (AHA), and the Council of Medical Specialty Societies (CMSS). Each year, the NRMP conducts a match that is designed to optimize the rank-ordered choices of students and program directors. In the third week of March, the results of the Match are announced.

The procedure for the NRMP Match is straightforward. Programs submit lists of applicants who have applied to them, in rank order of their preferences. Applicants submit lists of programs they have applied to in rank order of their preferences. The matching process starts with an attempt to place an applicant into the program indicated as most preferred on that applicant's list. The applicant is matched if the program has included that applicant in the program's rankings and if it has not been filled with more preferred applicants. If the applicant cannot be matched to this first choice program, an attempt is then made to place the applicant into the second choice program, and so on, until the applicant obtains a match or all of the applicant's choices have been exhausted.

There are two cardinal rules that both programs and applicants must observe: 1) neither must ask the other to make a verbal or written commitment before Match Day, and 2) all must abide by the results of the Match. Additionally, programs at institutions that participate in the Match can select US seniors only through the NRMP Match or another matching program. The NRMP works cooperatively with the military matches and the American Osteopathic Association's (AOA) match. Many applicants apply to the NRMP plus either a military match or the AOA match. Applicants matched in the earlier military or AOA matches are required to withdraw from the NRMP for their matched year.

To participate in the Match, students use the web-based NRMP Registration, Ranking and Results (R3) System located at [www.nrmp.org](http://www.nrmp.org). Registration for the Match begins in August. The entering of Rank Order Lists (ROL) takes place from mid-January to late February; Match results are announced in March. Applicants pay a registration fee via e-banking at the time of registration, and electronically sign an agreement to abide by the results of the Match.

Applicants can participate in the Match as partners in a couple. The two applicants indicate in the R3 System their intention to be a couple in the Match. Partners in a couple then form pairs of choices submitted on their Primary ROLs that are of the identical length. A partner can indicate his/her willingness to go unmatched if the other partner can get a position in the program designated at that rank.

The R3 System also allows applicants who wish to rank advanced programs in specialties that begin in the second year (PGY-2) of residency to create ROLs for both the PGY (Postgraduate Year)-1 and PGY-2. Each advanced program is linked to a supplemental ROL of preliminary programs. Applicants can create one supplemental list for all of their advanced programs, or a different one for each advanced program.

Match Day traditionally falls on the third or fourth Thursday in March, when most medical schools hold Match Day celebrations. Prior to Match Day, students are notified by the NRMP whether they are matched or unmatched. Student Affairs offices also receive the names of any unmatched students in advance of Match Day. There is a brief period of time (the "Scramble") before Match Day when unmatched applicants try to secure positions in unfilled programs. Student Affairs staff play a critical role in counseling and assisting unmatched students during this time. Rules for contacting programs with unfilled positions are established by the NRMP, and applicants and programs must adhere to these rules. Historically US senior medical students are very successful in the Match, with over 90% of them matching to a PGY1 program. Couples enjoy the same match rate as individual applicants. Studies have indicated that the length of the applicant's ROL plays a significant role in matching, with a consistent pattern of matched applicants having longer ROLs than unmatched applicants.

Additional information about the Match can be found on the NRMP's Web site at [www.nrmp.org](http://www.nrmp.org).

## **Federation Credentials Verification Service (FCVS)**

The Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) has established the Federation Credentials Verification Service (FCVS), which collects and maintains a file on a physician's core credentials as required for licensure and hospital credentialing. The FCVS can then respond to any inquiries about the physician, without having to go back to each individual source once again. The FCVS streamlines the credentialing and licensure procedure for physicians and for credentialing institutions and state medical boards.

Each candidate for licensure completes a form providing biographical information, educational history, and residency appointments. The candidate also completes and signs other forms authorizing the release of certain documents to the FCVS.

The FCVS then sends to the medical school an authorized request for a transcript and a photocopy of the diploma, as well as a series of questions. The FCVS asks the candidate the same questions as it has asked the medical school and then compares the applicant's responses with his/her school's responses. During 2000-2001, COSR members worked with FSMB personnel to revise the format of the questions contained on the FCVS form so that they better reflect the medical school policies and procedures regarding student progress. The final revised form was jointly approved by the COSR and the FSMB; it poses questions about the candidate's medical education that medical school personnel will be able to answer.

In addition, the FCVS verifies postgraduate training and Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) certification (if applicable). Once a graduate has reached USMLE Step 3, the FSMB becomes the

official repository for USMLE Step examinations for that individual. Credentials are held on file for the individual's lifetime. Presently, five states use FCVS exclusively; about half of state medical boards will accept FCVS verification for licensure.

### **Educating Medical Students on the Licensure Process**

The licensure and credentialing processes can be lengthy and confusing. Schools should consider holding a "licensure and credentialing workshop" for students, perhaps during the period surrounding the Match when students are looking ahead to their residency years. Since the information to be presented is personally relevant at this point in time, students will be more highly motivated to learn about these processes. An invited representative from the local state medical board can describe the procedures entailed in gaining licensure in the state. This information can be conveyed as early as first-year Orientation in order to provide students with a sense of the licensing and credentialing processes that lie ahead.

The FCVS form can be completed for each graduating senior before graduation, and reviewed with the student so that he/she knows how the school will respond to the questions posed on the School Certification Form.