

Career Counseling in Dermatology

Frequently-Asked Questions

This booklet has been prepared by the Department of Dermatology in response to questions frequently asked by medical students who wish to explore the training and career opportunities in this field. We hope that it will be helpful to students and serve as a basis of discussion in individual meetings with faculty members and residents.

- **Can you give me a brief description of the field? What are the key elements of this field that define it?**

Dermatology is a subspecialty field that encompasses internal medicine, pediatrics, pathology, and surgery. Dermatologists focus on diseases of the hair, nails and skin, including mucosa such as the mouth and genitalia. Utilizing the skin as a window onto the rest of a person's medical status, dermatologists often play a critical role in managing systemic disease such as infectious, autoimmune, neoplastic, and inflammatory conditions. This is a very visual-based field in which observational skills are critical.

- **What is the patient population that I will encounter? Will it include both children and adults? Will there be emergency work? What types of technology will I encounter?**

The patient population can range from newborns to elderly nursing home patients, across a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural demographics, depending on geographically where you choose to practice, as well as whether you have an academic-based or private practice. You can decide whether you would like to care for children, adults, or both. There infrequently are emergency cases in dermatology (for which residents are properly trained to care), and technologies are constantly innovating in terms of devices to detect and treat skin cancers, as well as cosmetic procedures (lasers, etc).

- **Is it possible to describe the personality characteristics of many physicians in this field?**

Although there are a wide range of personalities in dermatology, for the most part physicians in this field are visually-oriented and pay close attention to detail. Dermatologists are also somewhat "bookish" (we find rare diagnoses very exciting!). In some geographic locations, such as particularly sunny parts of the country where skin cancer is more prevalent, dermatologists even function at the level of primary care physicians, as patients may see you as often as every two to three months. Dermatologists are generally friendly and happy people and typically make good colleagues.

- **How long is the training program/residency?**

To become a board-certified general dermatologist you must complete a one year internship in either medicine, pediatrics, or a transitional year which encompasses a little of everything (similar to 3rd year of medical school). Dermatology residency is then an additional three years post-internship.

- Are there fellowships available after residency?**
 There are additional fellowship opportunities for those looking to further subspecialize in pediatrics, pathology, and skin cancer surgery (Mohs surgery). Fellowships are typically 1-2 years. It is not necessarily required to complete an official fellowship to care for pediatric patients, read pathology, or perform surgery if you are in private practice; however, for those seeking an academic position, fellowships are typically encouraged.
- How do I know if my academic record/grades will make me a suitable applicant?**
 Dermatology is highly competitive, and typically applicants have excelled on the USMLE exams, have engaged in scholarly endeavors in the form of research and publications, and have earned predominantly "honors" evaluations in their clinical clerkships.
- What is the role of my USMLE Step 1 score? What is a competitive score to qualify for an interview? If I failed Step 1 what are my options? Should I take Step 2 early?**
 Evaluation of the USMLE score is typically part of the screening process in terms of selecting a dermatology applicant for an interview. There is no official "cut-off" minimum score per se, but a general guideline would be to aim for a score of 220 or above (or 230 for more competitive residency programs) if you should desire to pursue a residency in dermatology. Most applicants have scores in the 240-250 range. Failing the USMLE exam would be read as a detrimental factor in your residency application. It is not required to take USMLE step 2 prior to applying for a residency in dermatology, but it is typically encouraged, especially if your USMLE step 1 score is not as high as you would have liked.
- Do I need a Step 2 Clinical Knowledge score to be screened for an interview? To be ranked?**
 Most institutions do not require (but do encourage) applicants to take Step 2 CK prior to applying for residency in dermatology. There is variability in this, however, and some institutions may not consider an application if the full USMLE step 2 scores are not available.
- Is there anything that I can do in my rotation or elective experience in this field to enhance my qualifications?**
 When rotating or doing an elective, volunteer to write up an interesting case for a journal or as a poster for presentation.
- Should I take outside electives in other institutions? If so, how many are advised and allowed?**
 Our philosophy is to do one away rotation in dermatology. It can be frowned upon to do multiple dermatology electives at the expense of doing other electives such as infectious disease, rheumatology etc.
- If your field requires a preliminary year what are your recommendations regarding that year?**
 A one year internship in pediatrics, medicine, surgery or a transitional year is required. It is an applicant's choice depending upon his/her interests.

- **Is a research experience important in my application to this field? Do I need to do a one year research experience? Will research offset a low Step 1 score? Should I have publications to qualify for your field?**

Research and publications are a plus, especially if a year is taken off between 3rd and 4th year to do a project. Many times applicants inquire about a one month project during their elective but it is hard to complete a meaningful project in such a short period of time. Research can offset a low Step 1 score, depending upon the project.

- **Is community service important in my application to this field?**

Yes, it helps demonstrate compassion and empathy toward others.

- **What do you advise on obtaining letters of recommendation? Should they all be from the field? How many should I have? Do I need a chair's letter? If so, how do I obtain that letter?**

Follow the guidelines on the application. The letters should be from an individual who knows you and your work well and can write an excellent letter about you. When a student does the Downstate dermatology elective they can make appointment(s) with the Chairman or Program Director or other attending to request a letter. A stronger letter can be written if you have done a research project, article, or chapter with an attending.

- **How do I meet with residents in the field and ask them to share their experiences and advice? Can I find residents with educational backgrounds similar to mine?**

You can contact the dermatology department 718-270-1229 and ask to be put in touch with the residents.

- **If I want to learn more about the field, can you recommend how I do that?**

Join a dermatology mentoring group in first or second year of medical school. Shadow the resident's and attending's in clinic. Go to the American Academy of Dermatology website (www.AAD.org) for more information.