

The Role of Social Media on Orthopaedic Residency Application Process during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Background: With the COVID-19 pandemic, the medical community saw many changes to practices and policies including medical education and the residency application process. Traditionally medical students in their fourth year of their training are allotted time for away rotations at an institution of their choosing. As a result of COVID-19, many medical schools were forced to eliminate away rotations from their curriculum due to concerns about student safety. This led to the advent of social media outlets designed for the specific purpose of providing medical students with information about residency programs in an effort to recruit interested candidates. With virtual meetings, online communications, and social media platforms all becoming a cornerstone in management of day-to-day hospital functioning this seemed the most appropriate way of adapting to the pandemic while still finding a way to communicate with medical students interested in orthopaedic surgery (9). We hypothesize that the advent of social media accounts during the COVID-19 pandemic would play a role in the orthopaedic residency application process.

Question/Purpose: Our question was to determine the role of social media on the orthopaedic surgery residency application process during the COVID-19 era.

Patients/Methods: An electronic survey consisting of 12 multiple-choice questions was created to query medical students applying to the field of orthopaedics about the role of social media on their application process. The survey link was emailed to all orthopaedic residency applicants available through the ERAS system.

Conclusion: Based on our results it appears applicants may be using social media accounts as a tool to get onto a residency program's "radar" rather than to obtain meaningful information about a program. Medical students do however find zoom meetings and open houses to be meaningful and provide valuable insight for their application process.

Introduction

The entire medical community was drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The orthopaedic community saw a drastic decrease in elective surgeries, due not only to patients contracting the COVID-19 virus, but also from changes to hospital policy regarding elective surgeries [1]. The pandemic also altered medical training with most surgical residents seeing a decrease in their case volume and medical students having limited educational activities. When evaluating medical student training during the pandemic, it was observed that many, if not all, medical schools were not allowing students to venture from their home facilities to perform

away rotations. This led to a significant change in the residency application process precedent from both a student and residency program prospective [2]. Traditionally the away rotation has been utilized for finding a "good fit" by both students and programs alike [3]. Without away rotations, residency programs and students were forced to develop a new way of determining "fit" [4]. Out of this need came residency-based social media accounts, Zoom "hangouts", and updated residency websites. Although residency websites have existed for years, they typically show a more formal overview of the program including rotation schedules, research interests, and other elements of the residency process. Historically,

however, these websites place less emphasis on the social aspects of resident life [5-7]). When looking for a less formal and more personal method of presenting such information, it seems logical that social media platforms would rise to the forefront as viable options. In 2011, roughly one quarter of program directors felt that Facebook or other social media outlets would be useful for recruitment purposes, however the absolute need for them was lacking [8]. With the unexpected and sudden changes brought about in the medical field by COVID-19, many residency programs responded by starting accounts on Instagram or Facebook and included content centered around resident life, social activities outside of the hospital, and other extracurricular attributes of the residency. Our aim for the study was to determine how medical students applying into orthopaedic surgery utilized social media during their application process.

Materials and Methods

Utilizing Google Surveys (Google, Mountain View, CA) we developed an anonymous, electronic survey that was e-mailed to roughly 600 medical students that applied to our residency program. Formatted with a combination of yes/no and multiple choice items, our survey contained twelve questions designed to determine the role and effectiveness of social media on the orthopaedic residency application process. Once the survey was distributed, we allowed two weeks for responses to accumulate and we reached 123 responses.

Results

We received 123 responses (20.5%). 95% (118/123) of applicants had social media accounts and of those with social media accounts 78.8% (92/118 $p<0.001$) followed an orthopaedic surgery residency program. The most popular social media platform was Instagram with 93% of applicants having an account ($p<0.001$). Additionally, 60% have a Facebook account and 38% have a Twitter account. 82% (76/92 $p<0.001$) of orthopaedic surgery applicants responded that they had not followed a residency program on social media prior to the pandemic. Greater than 55% of applicants identified as following less than ten social media accounts related to residency however ~25% followed more than 20 accounts including 5% following more than fifty programs. A significant number of the applicants were influenced by social media on which programs to apply to (26/92 $p<0.001$) and, over half of the applicants applied to every program they followed on social media. Additionally, more than half of all applicants felt that the social media outlets helped them to better understand the residency programs (68/92 $p<0.001$). We also sought to evaluate the usage and effectiveness of Zoom, or other video conferencing, on the application process. 95% (87/92 $p<0.001$) of all applicants participated in video conferences or open houses with a residency program and of that population 94% (82/87 $p<0.001$) found them helpful.

Discussion

As this is the first study of its kind to evaluate the utilization and effectiveness of social media on orthopaedic residency applications we sought to determine if, and how effective this method was for reaching applicants. Our data demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of orthopaedic surgery applicants can be reached through social media platforms. There is versatility in the utilization of social media pages disseminating information as nearly all of the

applicants have at least one social media account, and of those approximately 75% followed residency programs. Over half of all the applicants that followed social media pages felt that the information conveyed provided them with a better understanding of the program and went on to apply to the programs they followed.

Interestingly, 73% of the applicants felt that social media pages had no influence on the programs to which they applied. This begs the question whether applicants are merely following pages to gain exposure. Or, perhaps, do they already know they are going to apply to a given program despite what they see on the social media pages? The latter can be answered by the fact that three quarters of the applicants felt that the social media pages did not influence them to apply to programs they may have otherwise overlooked or not applied. Aiyer et al demonstrated that over fifty percent of applicants will match at either their home program or a program at which they rotated, despite sending out applications to an average of 86 programs. This may indicate a “shotgun” approach sometimes being utilized by applicants [2]. Overall, it appears the most effective strategy for reaching orthopaedic applicants is through video conference open houses on platforms such as Zoom or Skype. Of our respondents, 94.4% participated in an open house and 88% found it helpful for their application process. Historically, residency programs had used social media outlets to screen applicants, looking for events or images that may shed a negative light on their overall application [10]. Go et al. discovered that one third (33.3%) of program directors had ranked an applicant lower after review of the applicant’s social networking platform [11].

It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a large shift in the role of social media accounts, leading to a positive communicative experience. This updated role of social media seems to be a more collaborative experience between applicants and programs alike with the goal of transparently conveying information about one another to gain valuable knowledge. From this data, it appears that the applicants gain the most information from speaking to residents, faculty, and staff of the residency in a more casual Zoom “open house” environment rather than from passively observing posts on a social media page where they may be less inclined to actively participate.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of our study is that we were only able to obtain responses from 123/600 applicants. Although this only represents 20% of the applicant pool, we feel that the information is generalizable. Krosnick ET. Al found that mailed-in surveys with response rates of approximately 20% lead to more accurate results than in person or telephone surveys with response rates near 60% [12]. A strength of our study is all responses were kept anonymous.

Conclusion

Overall, it has become apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the way medical students are applying to residency programs. This study is the first of its kind to demonstrate that orthopaedic surgery applicants not only began following social media pages during the COVID-19 pandemic but additionally that these outlets are playing a major role in the application process itself. The millennial generation of orthopaedic

surgery applicants has a unique way not only of communicating, but learning. The propensity for residency programs to transition information onto social media platforms seems to be the obvious next step in this progression [13, 14]. It would appear that, based on information obtained from this study, most applicants are willing and eager to obtain any information possible about residency programs, especially when it is as simple as following a social media account. These accounts have provided a safe and effective way of reaching applicants during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the “best practices” for most effective ways in which to utilize such platforms has yet to be determined [15]. One important factor to note is that the majority of applicants followed fewer than ten social media accounts, while over half of applicants applied to greater than 60 programs. This information would lead us to hypothesize that applicants may be using social media accounts as a tool to get onto a residency program’s “radar” rather than to obtain meaningful information about a program.

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