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VIRTUAL RETINA FELLOWSHIP INTERVIEWS



How did remote interviewing go in 2020? Top fellowship directors review their experiences.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARUNAN SIVALINGAM, MD; TAREK S. HASSAN, MD; AND SUNIL K. SRIVASTAVA, MD
BY MATTHEW STARR, MD

The interview process for ophthalmology residencies and fellowships this past cycle was uniquely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview focuses on how fellowship directors at three top surgical retinal fellowships adjusted to the virtual interview process. They also offer tips for future fellowship applicants.

Matthew Starr, MD: Was it difficult to make the transition from in-person to virtual interviews?

Sunil K. Srivastava, MD: By the time the interview season came around this past year, all of us were already pretty used to the virtual format. There are multiple advantages to the virtual format. For applicants, there is a significant reduction in cost, and scheduling becomes much easier. For programs, there are fewer logistical challenges in arranging an interview day. However, what concerned us about the virtual format was our ability to communicate our culture and camaraderie to interviewees.

Arunan Sivalingam, MD: We hired a third-party company to manage all of the logistics required for our preinterview virtual dinner with applicants and interview day. We provided a schedule of events, and the company managed the three applicant pools, one for the interview, one to meet with the current fellows and clinical staff, and one to meet with some of our alumni. The Wills Eye Retina fellowship is unique, with over 20 active teaching attendings. In addition, the fellows play an essential role in resident teaching in the retina service clinic, the Wills Eye ER and the Jefferson consult service.

Tarek S. Hassan, MD: Getting over the idea that we would not be able to sit in the room with our candidates, and that they would not be able to see our program live and in person, was difficult in the beginning as it put us in such a novel situation. We have always enjoyed spending time with our candidates and getting to know them as well as possible during our interview period. It is always wonderful to meet these future colleagues.

It was good that we were more than 6 months into the pandemic before our interview days. During that time, all of us—staff members and candidates—had gotten comfortable with online meeting platforms and had been able to explore innovative new ones, so that we could maximize our opportunities to evaluate our potential new trainees under these strange circumstances. We found an innovative platform we could use to interact somewhat socially, and were also able to run a timely and personal formal interview process.

Dr. Starr: What did you do to try to give applicants a feel for your program?

Dr. Srivastava: We engaged them. We did some things differently for our interviewees this year. We sent each one short video clips made by the faculty with the theme of teaching. Some were serious, some attempted to be humorous, but all were successful in communicating to interviewees some insights into our personalities. We then asked our interviewees to do the same, and we were impressed by the responses. We learned a lot about our interviewees and their own passions and hobbies.

It was fun to then be able to talk about their videos or about our own videos during subsequent interviews, and this really sparked conversations. To give them a feel for our teaching styles and how our teaching faculty interacts, we invited our interviewees to our weekly teaching rounds (case conferences, surgical conferences) in a virtual format. Finally, we held two virtual hangouts toward the end of the season with our faculty, nurses, and fellows to give the candidates a feel for our culture.

Dr. Hassan: It is important for any good program to highlight aspects that stand out about them for a fellow to want to train there. We wanted our applicants to get to know us better, first as people and not as their future attendings. They can read about our professional accomplishments and the specifics of the program online, but they become part of our family when they become our fellows, and we want them to view us in that way—future teachers, mentors, and lifelong family members. We used a fun virtual platform for our cocktail-socializing hour the evening before the formal interview process. The applicants and our current fellows and attendings got to spend time chatting, joking, pranking, and simply enjoying each other's company.

We also provided videos about living, working, and playing in Royal Oak and Birmingham, Michigan, as well as information about local real estate. Certainly this is not a perfect substitute for being shown the area on an in-person visit, but we wanted to at least give the applicants a flavor of what it is like to enjoy the area outside of work. During the formal interview sessions, we provided the applicants with a guided video tour of all the physical spaces they would work in as fellows, again trying to give them a sense of what they would have seen had they come to visit.

Dr. Sivalingam: We created a prerecorded video tour and had as many current and past fellows as possible available for questions during a preinterview dinner as well as on the day of the interview. We also created a live webinar before the virtual dinner to go over the fellowship and show the candidates around the hospital. We wanted to give the information about the Wills family during and after fellowship. Contact information for the participating fellows was available to the applicant pool for follow up questions.

Dr. Starr: Did you do anything differently when selecting candidates for interviews or when ranking candidates?

Dr. Sivalingam: It was extremely difficult not meeting the candidates in person. We have many connections within the retina community, and thus we relied more on recommendations from faculty and follow-up phone calls with the residency programs.

Dr. Hassan: We didn't change anything about the process of selecting candidates to interview. The application review

process was the same. But we spent as much time as possible with the virtual evaluation of each candidate and then spent even more time calling many friends and colleagues who are mentors to the applicants with whom we were most interested in matching. In short, we were left relying more than usual on the insights and impressions of others to help complete our picture of the candidate pool.

Dr. Srivastava: We tried to select applicants for interviews using similar criteria as in years past. Our ranking process this year was also pretty similar to years past. Application, interview, and letters of recommendation are all still the main criteria for our ranking process.

Dr. Starr: Did any applicants do anything during the virtual interview that really made them stand out?

Dr. Srivastava: Our interviewees spent some time producing short video clips for us. This was a really useful medium to get to know them.

Dr. Hassan: No single applicant did anything too out of the ordinary, but we did take special notice of those who were particularly adept at accepting and being comfortable with the virtual format and were thus able to be more relaxed and natural in showing us their true personalities.

Dr. Sivalingam: No candidate did anything in particular to make themselves stand out. Some applicants may have had a slightly better virtual setup, but, while these facets are nice, they did not outweigh the important details from the applicants' CVs.

Dr. Starr: What would be your best piece of advice for future applicants during virtual interviews or meetings?

Dr. Sivalingam: Camera placement and strong WiFi are essential. Applicants should be looking straight into the camera rather than down at their screens.

Dr. Srivastava: Allow your personality to shine through as best you can. Be engaging. Show us you can connect with people you have just met, similar to how we must connect with patients quickly when we care for them.

Dr. Hassan: The best advice for applicants for any interview or meeting—most particularly in the virtual setting—is to be yourself. It sounds trite, but in fact there is nothing we consider more highly than the personality and character of the applicant when we meet him or her at the interview. The specifics of their record, their recommendations, and their goals and aspirations are largely known from their applications. Fellowship interview situations are used to create a match—not only an academic one, but a much more

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personal one that allows a program to confidently take on a new fellow who will forever be part of the family.

Dr. Starr: Given the option, would you prefer virtual or in-person interviews next year?

Dr. Sivalingam: Definitely in-person interviews. Not only is it easier for us, but the applicants truly get to experience the Wills Retina Service interview process and get a sense of what makes Wills special. This intangible is not quite captured without an in-person interview.

Dr. Srivastava: I can tell you about all of the good stuff that came from the virtual process, and how the process was easier, but I would take in-person interviews over virtual.

Dr. Hassan: Although I love that the applicants were able to save a great deal of money and time by not flying all over the country interviewing for fellowships, I think both applicants and programs gain a much better sense of one another on an in-person visit. We were forced to use virtual platforms this year, but I think we may eventually come up with somewhat of a hybrid system using some combination of in-person and virtual interviews—potentially even with multiple programs cooperating in ways that would combine efforts to help candidates lessen their overall travel and time burdens. These details must be further studied and worked out, beginning soon after the match this year. ■

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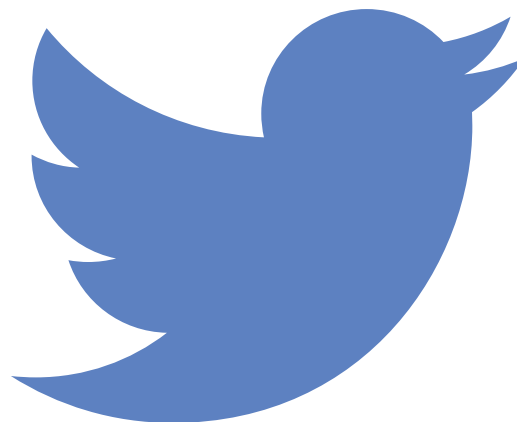
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