Academic quality of incoming ophthalmology residents in India: Concerns for the future

Dear Editor:

We note with concern, for ophthalmology, the results of round-1 seat allotment for National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test—Post-Graduation (NEET-PG) 2020, declared in April 2020.\[1\] Except for a few institutions, all-India ranks (AIRs) on the NEET-PG perform as the sole admission criterion to the majority of residency positions in India, and thereby to a career as specialist. Top rankers here represent the finest candidates offered by our medical education system. Currently, India has 1616 MD/MS, 103 Diploma, and 292 DNB (post-MBBS) positions for ophthalmology training.\[2\]

Unfortunately, top AIRs have continued to ignore ophthalmology, as per last available data since NEET-PG 2017, when the exam began. In 2020, not a single examinee under-100 AIR chose ophthalmology, while seven of top-10 AIRs picked general medicine.\[3\] Similarly, no more than 2 in top-500 AIR and 10 in top-1000 AIR in each year have chosen ophthalmology. This year also saw the least number of candidates in both top-2500 and top-5000 AIRs choosing ophthalmology [Fig. 1].

Regarding the academic quality of incoming ophthalmology residents in India, these observations are perturbing, considering the speciality’s extremely competitive nature in developed nations. In the USA, where US Medical Licensing Examination Step-1 scores serve as a critical surrogate of competitiveness, average score for applicants accepted to ophthalmology usually hovers amongst the highest of all specialties.\[4\] Similarly, in the UK, as per “competition ratios”, i.e., number of applicants per training position, ophthalmology is highly preferred as a speciality.\[5\]

Urgent action on multiple fronts, led by All India Ophthalmological Society, is warranted to encourage the best candidates to choose ophthalmology. While we have been addressing ways to improve our residency and fellowship programmes, time and again, this important aspect has been largely ignored.\[6,7\] These unfortunate findings and ignorance of non-preference for speciality training have been true for otorhinolaryngology (ENT) as well, a field that is taught to MBBS students in the same year as ophthalmology.\[8\] Good quality seeds grow into the greatest trees; and the time has come to actively work towards acquiring them. Highlighting the obvious advantages of our field to the undergraduates, encouraging greater participation in clinical work, and having online career counselling prior to NEET-PG seat selection are some of the suggestions. We also need to widely promote the virtues of our profession through greater engagement on social media. By viewing third-year students as future trainees and treating them so, we shall go a long way.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.
October 2020 Letters to the Editor 2317

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

Ahmad Ozair, Kaushal K Singh, Siddharth Agrawal
Faculty of Medicine, and Department of Ophthalmology, King George’s Medical University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Correspondence to: Dr. Siddharth Agrawal, Department of Ophthalmology, King George’s Medical University, Lucknow - 226 003, Uttar Pradesh, India. E-mail: agrawalsiddharth@rediffmail.com

References
1. Medical Counselling Committee. [Internet] India: Medical Counselling Committee. Final Result Round 1 PG 2020 (Medical): PG Medical Counselling. Available from: https://mcc.nic.in/PGCounselling/Home/ShowPdf?Type=50C9E8D5FC98727B4BC93CF5D64A68DB647F04F and ID=7EE51D9582EF3D3B56EC2FC2577FC147D8563E5. [Last cited on 2020 Apr 19].
2. Medical Council of India (MCI). [Internet] India: Medical Council of India. College and Course Search. Information desk. Available from: https://www.mciindia.org/CMIS/information-desk/college-an-m-course-search. [Last cited on 2020 Apr 17].
3. SF Match, US. [Internet] SF Match. Ophthalmology Residency Match Summary Report 2019. Available from: https://www.sfmacth.org/PDFFilesDisplay/Ophthalmology_Residency_Stats_2019.pdf. [Last cited on 2020 Apr 18].
4. National Resident Matching Program, US. [Internet] National Resident Matching Program. Charting Outcomes in the Match: U.S. Allopathic Seniors. Available from: https://mk0nrmp3oyqui6wqfm.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Charting-Outcomes-in-the-Match-ch-2018-Seniors-1.pdf. [Published 2018 Jul, Last cited on 2020 Apr 18].
5. Competition Ratios 2019. National Health Service. [Internet]. Available from: https://specialitytraining.hee.nhs.uk/For_tals/1/Competition%20Ratios%202019_1.pdf. [Last cited on 2020 Apr 17].
6. Grover AK. Residency training in India: Time for a course correction. Indian J Ophthalmol 2018;66:743-4.
7. Narayanan R, Gupta SR, Honavar SG. Fellowship training in India: How to produce leaders? Indian J Ophthalmol 2018;66:1671-2.

Figure 1: The graphs provide data of the number of candidates preferring ophthalmology residency via the NEET-PG, from its introduction as NEET-PG 2017, till the year 2020, amongst (a) the top-500 all-India ranks (AIRs); (b) the top-1000 AIRs; (c) the top-2500 AIRS; and (d) the top-5000 AIRs.
8. Ozair A, Singh AB. Why are India’s best medical graduates not preferring ENT for postgraduate training through NEET-PG? Indian J Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg. Published 30 Jun 2020. Epub ahead of Print, Available from: http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12070-020-01926-6

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.