

Insider's Guide: Top 8 Things to Look for When Selecting a Pathology Residency Training Program

The primary goal of this document is to help you best determine what a Pathology Residency program does and does not offer and what you want/need to learn for your future practice. Most residency programs will provide adequate training in general pathology. How much you learn will be up to you, so it is vital to pick a program that matches your interests and goals and your learning style. This document will guide you in identifying the differences between various programs in order to assist you in your selection process. There are no “wrong” answers.

1. Will the program train and prepare you for the future?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the anatomic pathology program? Is there adequate volume and diversity of cases? Are there outside opportunities for experience in areas of special interest or program weakness?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the clinical pathology program? Is there “hands on” experience? How much interaction do the residents have with clinicians? How much real responsibility do the residents have when on service?
- How prevalent is new technology and how is it taught? Is there an opportunity for hands on experience?
- Does the program include training in molecular pathology, cytogenetics, and informatics?
- Does the program include training in laboratory and practice management?
- When was the last ACGME review of the program and what was the outcome?

2. How well does the program prepare you for jobs or fellowships?

- After completion of training, where do the residents end up, i.e., community hospital positions, academic positions, fellowships, etc.? Identify a program with goals similar to your own.
- How well do current residents believe they've been prepared? If possible, speak to a recent graduate of the program who is now out in practice.
- What support is given to residents to find a good fellowship or job?
- Does the program offer fellowships? If so, ask about the quality and quantity.
- Will the resident have the opportunity to participate as an inspector in the CAP LAP program? How many inspections have the faculty conducted? Are residents always included in the inspection team?
- Does the program address or educate residents in the basics of private practice pathology? If the resident is interested in a career in private practice, are there opportunities to learn CPT coding, payer relationships, hospital contract negotiations, vendor relationships, labor law, anti-trust law, medical staff matters, etc.?

3. What is the environment of the program like and the attitude of the administration?

- Are residents viewed as valuable members of the team?
- Is there freedom to express your ideas? Is the program open to new ideas?
- Ask about attending turnover. Is the department growing, shrinking, or static? Ask about the hospital overall. How active are the medical and surgical specialties and are they growing, shrinking or static?

- How many attendings are established and experienced? What is the ratio of junior to senior attendings?
- Does this program seem like a comfortable environment for you and how you learn best? Do you work better as a team player or as an individual? Do you like large or small settings?
- Ask about on-call and weekend coverage responsibilities and frequency.
- How does the program feel about moonlighting? What are the rules for moonlighting?
- Are all positions filled through the match? If not, how are the others filled? Are any faculty or divisions recruiting residents on their own? If so, do these residents get special treatment?

4. What is the teaching style of the program?

- Ask about the graduated responsibilities for residents in both AP and CP from year one through four. How much real responsibility do senior residents have for reviewing cases prior to sign out, signing out cases, presenting at conferences, and teaching?
- Is there a structured study program or reading schedule to systematically assimilate the vast amount of information there is to understand?
- What's the level of resident-driven education sessions?
- What's the primary method of education? (didactic, slides, self-study?) How many didactic lectures are scheduled each week?
- Are the attendings interested in teaching?
- Do residents get to perform bone marrows and FNA's or will they just read them? How many are performed and read?

5. How are surgical pathology sign-outs set up?

- What are the specifics of the grossing schedule? How many are done each month? Are there PAs? If so, what are their duties?
- Do residents gross biopsies? Are residents generally happy with their grossing duties?
- Is sign out generalized or structured according to subspecialty?
- Does the resident have ample time to review cases prior to sign out?
- Do you get one-on-one time with attendings for sign outs that aren't rushed and that cover a variety of specimens?
- Are residents able to complete 50 autopsy cases comfortably as required to sit for the Pathology Boards? Will residents be required to "double up" to meet the minimum number? Are there autopsies on weekends?
- What is the exposure to forensic autopsies? How many cases do the residents participate in and how involved are they in the cases? How diverse are the forensic cases?

6. What is the Board pass rate of the program's residents?

- Ask for the five-year average pass rate for both AP and CP.
- If fellowships are offered, what is the pass rate for specialty boards?

7. What do current residents think about the program?

- Do they seem happy? Do they get along with each other? Are they motivated?
- Does there appear to be staff camaraderie and support of resident education?

- How many residents in the last ten years have left the program before completing it, and what were the reasons?
- How many local/national/international meetings will the resident be funded to attend? Is attendance limited to those meetings in which the resident will present a paper or program? How is it determined which residents can go to which meetings?

8. What opportunities are available for research and publication?

- Will the attendings support and encourage these activities?
- Will residents have plenty of opportunities to participate in research projects leading to peer-reviewed publications? Is research required, encouraged, or not available? How many publications/abstracts have residents from the program co-authored in the last ten years?

After your interview, follow up with a letter to the chair and/or program director to thank them for their time. This is also a great opportunity to ask any follow-up questions for which you did not receive answers during your interview. Finally, if you have concerns about anything that was told to you verbally during your interview, you may consider asking for written confirmation of what you heard during your visit.