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Before Match Day, Med Students Go Through Chaotic 'Scramble'



Colin Son had to scramble this week to find a spot in a residency program.

Tomorrow will be momentous for thousands of graduating medical students: It's Match Day, when they're told where they'll do their residencies.

As we [explained](#) last year, a great big computer spits out a long list matching graduating med students with residency programs. The computer considers where the students said they want to go and which programs want which students.

Some students have already been having a stressful week. They're the ones who were informed on Monday that they hadn't matched with a program. To get one of the remaining residency spots out there, they speed through this other thing called the 'Scramble.' A growing number of students are going through the Scramble, as the number of applicants for residency programs exceeds the number of available positions. That's

happening in part because medical-school classes are growing and more students at medical schools abroad are applying, says Mona Signer, executive director of the [National Resident Matching Program](#).

Colin Son, a student at the [University of Texas Health Science Center](#) in San Antonio, was disappointed to find out on Monday that he hadn't been placed into a neurosurgery residency program, and that no such slots remained. So on Tuesday, he set his sights on general surgery, sending out applications and calling up programs that still had open spots, and doing quick phone interviews. "It's kind of a hectic process," Son tells the Health Blog.

Signer takes it a step further, calling the Scramble "chaotic." NRMP and the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) have a working group that's looking for ways to calm it down, at least somewhat.

Signer describes their proposal like this: Instead of the students finding out Monday that they haven't matched, and the remaining open slots being publicized at noon on Tuesday, both of those steps would take place on Monday. Then, the students would be able to send their applications for open slots on Monday (though that timing is still a bit unclear). They'd have to use an [electronic system](#) run by AAMC, rather than the multitude of communication means, such as email and faxes, that are used now and that can jam up programs' systems.

Rather than the very fast mating dance on Tuesday, the programs wouldn't be able to make offers until Wednesday — which believe it or not, would be significantly more time for them to make decisions. Applicants could receive multiple offers, which would be sent through NRMP's system. Match Day would be moved from Thursday to Friday.

As it stands now, "programs get in some cases hundreds of applications for just one or two unfilled positions, and their queues can be jammed," Signer tells the Health Blog. "They don't have time to download all the applications to find the best candidates."

Signer says the proposal is still under consideration and could change significantly before it's finalized. The changes wouldn't happen until 2011. Read more details on the proposal [here](#).

As for Son, after he spent about 30 minutes on the phone with a few programs on Tuesday, the University of Texas offered him a general surgery slot. He accepted.

“The advice my dean gives us, and it’s probably good advice, is to prioritize the programs you want to apply to — but you really want to take the first offer that comes your way,” Son says. “That was the first official offer.”

Photo Courtesy of Colin Son

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