Most U.S. medical seniors land residency spots on Match Day

*Ninety-five percent of fourth-year students nationwide receive their residency placements, the highest Match rate in 30 years.*

By Carolyne Krupa
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The days leading up to Match Day 2012 were the hardest for Sara Taub. The applications had been filled out, and all the traveling and interviews were done. It was time to wait.

“The hardest part is when you know that a decision has been made, but there’s still a week before you find out,” Taub said.

Finally on March 16, she and other fourth-year medical students across the country opened envelopes telling them where they would begin their careers as residents. Taub was among 127 students who learned their residency placements during Match Day celebrations at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Most U.S. medical students matched with residencies

“For many of us, this is more important than graduation,” Taub said.

Nationwide, 22,934 applicants were assigned first-year residency positions for Match Day, including 15,712 U.S. allopathic medical school seniors. At 95%, it was the highest Match rate for fourth-year U.S. allopathic medical school students in 30 years, according to the National Resident Matching Program. A total of 1,764 students and graduates of U.S. osteopathic schools also received first-year residency positions.

It was the first year of the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program, which is designed to streamline placement of students who weren’t selected for a first-year residency in the main Match.

“It’s the largest match in our history,” said Mona Signer, MPH, executive director of the NRMP. “It was certainly a highly successful one, and adding SOAP to it this year was just the icing on the cake.”

The 2012 resident Match rate of 95% was the highest in 30 years.
A total of 38,377 people worldwide applied for 26,772 U.S. residency positions, up 642 applicants from 2011 and more than 2,400 applicants during the last five years.

Though the increases are positive, more residency positions are needed, said Assn. of American Medical Colleges President and CEO Darrell G. Kirch, MD. The association is urging the federal government to increase Medicare funding for graduate medical education.

“To help avert the doctor shortage, the nation’s medical schools have been expanding enrollment since 2006 and are now on track to educate 30% more MDs by 2017,” Dr. Kirch said. “Teaching hospitals also have entirely self-funded the training of thousands of additional doctors since 2000. But these increases are not enough to avert the expected shortage of 90,000 physicians by 2020.”

The end of the “Scramble”
SOAP, which was developed in partnership with the AAMC, replaced the “Scramble,” in which unmatched students had to scurry to contact residency programs with unfilled positions trying to get a slot. It was disorganized and highly competitive, Signer said.

The process has been automated with SOAP. The NRMP published lists of programs with open residency positions, and unmatched students applied for those positions through the AAMC’s Electronic Residency Application Service. Residency directors then ranked applicants, and the NRMP offered positions to students in eight offer rounds. Applicants had two hours to make a decision after an offer was made.

Nearly 23,000 medical students were matched to residencies on Match Day 2012. About 1,000 positions were filled through SOAP this year, but as with any new program, implementing SOAP created some headaches. “Anytime we introduce new software, it’s stressful,” Signer said. “This was certainly stressful for us. The overall consensus is that it’s an improvement over the Scramble and that it probably needs to be tweaked a little over the year.”

Fourth-year Loyola student Joseph Gastala participated in SOAP after he was selected for advanced residency placement, but needed to find a place to do his first year of training. His wife, Nicole, also is in her fourth-year at Loyola, and the couple wanted to be placed together.

Fourth-year Loyola student Joseph Gastala
Going through SOAP was just another step they had to take to make that happen, Nicole Gastala said. Her husband will do his first year of residency in diagnostic radiology at Loyola and then join her at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, where he will complete his training and she will train in family medicine.

“It’s a really complicated process,” Joseph Gastala said. “There is a lot of stress involved. But we’re very, very happy. We really like the city.”

Four percent of seniors at Loyola’s Stritch School of Medicine participated in SOAP, and all of them were placed. Dean Linda Brubaker, MD, said it’s too soon to tell whether SOAP is better than the Scramble. “It was certainly different,” she said.

Becoming physicians
Dr. Brubaker said she has been attending Match Day celebrations for about 15 years, but the excitement never wears off.

“Each class is unique and special in their own way,” she said. “You can feel the energy in the room. It is the first time the reality that they are a professional starts to hit home. It’s the first real job for many of them.”

Loyola student Susan Slattery learned she was selected to do her residency training in pediatrics at the University of Chicago. It was her top choice of the 11 programs on her rank list, and she was happy to share the big moment with family and friends by her side.

“Opening the letter was exciting,” she said. “I had full confidence that it would all work out.”
Taub also got her first choice. She will do her residency training in pediatrics at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland. Her husband is from the area, and the couple is excited to start their new lives on the West Coast. But Taub said March 16 that she hadn’t even begun thinking about the move.

“Up until today I didn’t know if I was leaving Chicago,” she said.