



The 1999 residency match: finally, some good news for anesthesia

Patrick Sullivan

Initial results from the 1999 residency match contain some welcome news for Canada's 2200 anesthetists, but they paint a bleak picture for the country's obstetricians.

Data from the first round of the 1999 match, which was completed Mar. 17, indicate that 57 of the 60 residency positions in anesthesia were filled this year, a marked improvement over last year's results, when 15 of 58 positions went unfilled.

At the other end of the spectrum, only 37 of 49 residency positions in obstetrics/gynecology were filled in the first iteration of the 1999 match, compared with 46 of 50 positions in 1998.

Canada's anesthetists have been vocal about a worsening shortage within their specialty. The situation is so bad in Manitoba that the province and the Manitoba Medical Association recently agreed on a new fee schedule for anesthetists in an attempt to retain more of them. Their payments will now be based on a relative value guide.

If the 1999 match is any indication, the specialty may have taken a key step toward solving its problems. Not only did 145 medical students apply for residencies in the field, an increase of 34 over last year, but 19 of them applied solely for training in anesthesia, compared with 11 in 1998.

Dr. Ian White, a Winnipeg anesthetist, is delighted by the 1999 results. He thinks they are due in part to efforts by the Canadian Anesthesiologists' Society and other groups to raise the specialty's profile.

"We have spent more than \$100 000 on issues surrounding 'image' and in raising the profile of anesthesia among medical students," says White, a past president of the Manitoba Medical Association. "It also helps when they are aware that there are jobs around when they graduate."

White practises at the St. Boniface General Hospital, which is currently short 2.5 full-time-equivalent anesthetists. "This is leading to 30 to 60 room closures a month," he says. "This means a backlog of cases and more unscheduled emergency work."

He says the entire province faces "a major problem." In 1989 he determined that Manitoba faced a looming shortage of 10 to 15 specialist anesthetists. "The problem has been masked to some extent by about 7 anesthetists at or over age 65 who are still working full time."

Sandra Banner, executive director of the Canadian Resident Matching Service, says the renewed interest in anes-

thesia and some other specialties may point to growing interest in hospital-based practices.

Meanwhile, the number of students who applied exclusively to obstetrics-gynecology plummeted 42% from a year ago, to 12 students; the total number of applicants declined by 19%.

Banner wasn't surprised by the cool reception. The specialty has been beset by some high-profile legal disputes and labour actions recently, and its members have been complaining loudly about their working conditions. "Maybe the SOGC [Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada] isn't doing itself any favours by complaining so loudly," Banner commented. "They may be driving some medical students away."

Banner says the overall 1999 results mirror those of the last few years "with remarkable consistency. Once again almost 94% of all graduates were matched in the first iteration of the match, and 88% were matched to their first career choice."

She noted that the 1999 match attracted a slightly greater number of men (584) than women (565) and produced 2 firsts: more women chose dermatology than men and more women were accepted into emergency medicine than men.

Bad news in Nfld., Sask.

Initial results indicate that 98 positions in 50 programs were not filled in the first match. One-third of residency positions available in Newfoundland and Saskatchewan went unfilled, including 3 of 5 openings for pediatricians at Memorial University.

General pathology was the only specialty shut out entirely in the initial match, failing to attract a single applicant for the 2 positions available. Hematological pathology and medical biochemistry each attracted a single applicant, while medical microbiology attracted 2 applicants.

Of the 1149 students in the match, 65% (756) applied for family medicine residencies; 253 of them (22%) applied to no other specialty. Family medicine totals for 1998 were 792 and 229, respectively.

Banner says attitudes toward the match have changed. "Today I find that students are quite comfortable with the process, although some faculty members still feel anxious about it."

Patrick Sullivan is News and Features Editor at CMAJ.