Lab to Smartphone

How Psychiatry Residencies Became Competitive Again

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When I started medical school in 2014, the field of psychiatry was considered a "layup" residency to match into. I recall one professor saying, "You all must excel in your academics to give yourself the best chance in matching, because it is incredibly competitive—unless you want psychiatry."

Don't look now, but psychiatry is becoming one of the more competitive categorical residency programs. In the past 5 years, matching in psychiatry "increased both modestly and consistently".[1] The National Residency Matching Program (NRMP) reports that in 2016, the proportion of total US seniors matching into psychiatry was 5.0%.[2] In 2020, the proportion increased to 6.3%. Furthermore, the number of positions offered in psychiatry continues to steadily grow each year. In 2020, psychiatry positions offered (1,858) was the highest recorded and represented a 34.2% (474) increase from 2016 (1,384) and 74.0% (789) increase from 2008 (1,069).[1] What might be behind this increased popularity of psychiatry? Nobody knows for sure, and different people obviously choose the specialty for different reasons. Here, however, are a few of the possibilities.

Prevalence. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that approximately 1 in 6 US children has a mental, behavior, or developmental disorder.[3] A recent report by the American Psychological Association estimates a 71% increase in adolescents experiencing serious monthly psychological distress from 2008 to 2017 (an increase from 7.7% to 13.1%).[4] As the prevalence increases, so does the likelihood of knowing someone suffering from a mental health condition. This increase in the number of struggling youths is attracting increased media attention and may be inspiring some medical students to answer the call.

Neuropsychiatric Research Advancements. For centuries the mind was a longstanding mystery in medicine. However, recent discoveries continue to unveil previously unknown neurobiological complexities contributing to mental health. Neuroimaging, brain mapping, and genetic sequencing research studies reveal key insights into the neurophysiologic processes underlying many psychiatric disorders. Alongside other related medical fields, such as sleep and pain medicine, we continue to understand the multiple factors affecting psychiatry. As we slowly unravel some of the mysteries of our "home" organ, psychiatry's parallels with other specialties becomes more apparent.

Reduced Stigma. Mental health stigma remains a significant problem but has been falling, thanks in part to social media. With the emergence of innovative communication technologies, we enter an era of unprecedented access to people. From celebrities to key public figures, social media has provided a platform for many people to openly share their personal struggles with mental health. Some pop culture influencers have also deliberately aimed to break the stigma in specific campaigns such as #YouAreNotAlone. These efforts have demonstrated how common mental illness is in the United States. Through the use of hashtags, public figures, and nationwide campaigns, social media helped spread the importance of mental health to millions.

Work-Life Balance. Psychiatry can bring a healthy balance between work and lifestyle. The work environment of psychiatrists can include an office setting with regular working hours, fewer emergencies, and less on-call obligations, although recent events with COVID-19 have shown that these qualities are not guaranteed. Nevertheless, this schedule allows more time for family, hobbies, or any non-work activities which in

turn can reduce the risk of future burnout. Quality of life is becoming a growing priority for students choosing a medical specialty.

Physician-Patient Relationship. The physician-patient relationship is a sacred partnership. However, the current health care system overwhelms physicians with paperwork, billing literacy, and documentation. I fell in love with medicine for the connections between the physician and the patient. But now, the overwhelming logistical duties sacrifice time spent conversing with the patient, requiring attention to their electronic documentation instead. While psychiatry also struggles with these encumbrances, the true art of medicine still lives. Spending more time getting to know your patient, a psychiatrist can use their knowledge and authentic communication to not only understand the diagnosis but more so the human being sitting across from them.

Job Opportunity. Psychiatry career opportunities are wide and various. There has remained a persistent disparity between decreased supply of psychiatrists and increased demand of mental health services. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reported only 7.5 of the 11.2 million (66.7%) of US adults suffering from serious mental illness received necessary services.[5] As a result, employment opportunities are abundant in both rural and urban areas. Regarding specialization, numerous psychiatry fellowships offer subspecialties in addiction, child and adolescent, forensic, geriatric, liaison consulting, and many more. With so many branches to choose from, each psychiatry resident is more likely to find their niche interest.

Integrative Medicine. It is increasingly clear that mental health is a foundation for general health, and how your body influences your mental health and vice versa. Maintaining a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and practicing meditation all improve one's physical and mental health. As these bidirectional influences become more and more apparent, the value of psychiatrists and other mental health professionals in healthcare settings of all kind is being fully appreciated with there being growing opportunities for collaboration.

Because of these factors, and others, psychiatry is now in much more demand. While this may lead to some extra challenges for those wishing to enter the field, such a shift is a positive development both for those doing psychiatric work and the people whom we serve.

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