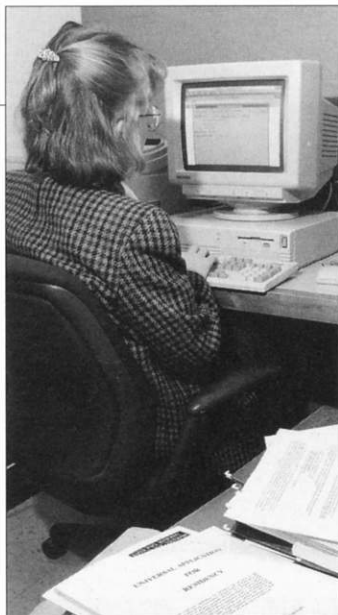


New ERAS in residency applications

For the past two and a half years, DMS Dean Andrew Wallace has been chairing a committee of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) that is charged with computerizing the paper-laden process by which some 16,000 fourth-year medical students nationwide are selected each spring for residency training. Now, with the impending completion of the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), success is in sight.

Achieving fair and efficient residency matches has always involved months of chaos before the February application deadline. Assistant Dean for Student Affairs Sue Ann Hennessy used to work in the office of Associate Dean for Education Martha Regan-Smith, M.D. "Each year we'd drop everything in October," recalls Hennessy, "and become full-time clerks and application packet-assemblers, concentrating on little else but getting students placed."

The amount of paper generated is astounding. Each student applies to 15 or 20 programs, many with their own special requirements, and application materials must be assembled from multiple sources. The administration sends out a transcript; a "dean's letter" describing the student; and any special forms given programs require. The student sends out an application form, a *curriculum vitae*, a personal statement, and often several special forms. Letters of recommendation written by from



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DMS senior Christine Lau tries out the software for the new Electronic Residency Application Service.

three to ten faculty members are sent in separately. Even at a small school like DMS, with about 65 graduates, the process generates nearly 10,000 critical documents.

At the other end, in residency program directors' offices, the madness is no less intense, with information on as many as 1,000 applicants converging from different sources for each applicant.

Since 1953, the National Residency Match Program (NRMP), a nationally networked computer system, has helped speed up the actual matching. That has evolved over the years from a purely paper process, through a punch-card phase, to the current six-minute computer run.

A better way: But still, writing, filling out, assembling, and mailing, then opening, collating, filing, and circulating all those documents — not to mention evaluating them — was enough to make everyone think there must be a better way of doing things.

ERAS, the brainchild of Dean

Wallace's 14-member committee, promises to replace the avalanche of paper with a user-friendly, responsive, flexible, Windows-based software program.

Here's how it will work: By November 1 of their fourth year, medical students will sit down at workstations loaded with ERAS student software and input their application information. To a standardized common application form, they will add CVs, personal statements, and their list of desired residency programs. At another workstation, staff in the dean's office will add transcripts and dean's letters and will scan in faculty recommendations. The resulting packages will be encrypted and sent via the Internet to the programs the student specifies.

At the receiving end, program directors will acknowledge, print, and disseminate the information to evaluators. In February, after students are interviewed, the program directors will enter a rank-ordered list of applicants, and each student will enter a rank-ordered list of programs.

Then the NRMP computer in Washington, D.C., scans all the lists, matching applicants to positions until every applicant is placed in a program as high as possible on his or her list, and every residency program obtains as many as possible of its highest-ranked applicants.

When the computer stops whirring, it's all over but the waiting for Match Day: the third Wednesday in March, when students nationwide learn simultaneously where they'll be going after graduation. (See the story on page 5 for the results of this year's

Match at DMS.) In fact, once the new system is in place, Match Day will feature the only remaining piece of paper in the system: students' official acceptance letters.

This winter, at the AAMC's annual meeting, more than 250 people previewed the ERAS software. The early reviews were entirely enthusiastic.

As were those from a March alpha-test of the software at DMS. A subsequent beta-test at DMS and the 16 other alpha-test sites will be followed by a nationwide pilot run next year, limited to 1996 graduates applying to ob-gyn programs. If all goes well, all residency applications for the Class of 1997 will be made by the new electronic method.

Fantastic idea: Daniel Loisell, one of the DMS alpha-testers, thinks ERAS is "a fantastic idea."

"Application time comes when so much else is happening in our lives — who wants to spend weeks typing up and collating a different application packet for each residency program we're interested in. With ERAS, you spend an hour and a half inputting data and selecting what you want to go into each application.

"Not only does it save time, paper, and postage," he adds, "but with everything in standardized form, applications will differ only in their personal content — which, after all, is what we really want to be judged on."

Loisell sees one more plus to ERAS: "I'm happy to participate in the test," he says, "because I've got a sister in her third year at Cornell Med School. I hope ERAS will be up and running in time for her to benefit from it."