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A How-To Guide: Virtual Interviews in the Era of Social Distancing

Maureen V. Hill, MD, Richard J. Bleicher, MD, and Jeffrey M. Farma MD

Department of Surgical Oncology, Fox Chase Cancer Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The coronavirus crisis hit at the beginning of the Complex General Surgical Oncology Fellowship (CGSO) and Breast Oncology Fellowship interview cycles. Within 2 weeks, nearly all programs, including ours, switched to a virtual platform for the remainder of the season. Given that social distancing will remain in place for the foreseeable future, it is possible that all residency and fellowship interviews will need to be conducted virtually. Our methods and shared experience can assist other programs faced with this task for their upcoming interview cycle. We recommend using a virtual meeting platform in which staff have the most comfort; we chose Zoom as our platform. Information on the program traditionally included in the welcome packet, research opportunities, details on the institution, hospital and staff, and detailed interview instructions were distributed prior to the interview day. A virtual “happy hour” was conducted to provide an opportunity for candidates and current trainees to interact. Our virtual interview day schedule mimicked our traditional in person interview day, and we always had a back-up plan for completing the interview if the virtual platform became unstable. While many programs would not choose to perform virtual interviews, we felt that by conducting them in the methods we describe, we were able to closely replicate our traditional interview day and appreciate the candidacy of the applicants. (J Surg Ed 000:1–3. © 2020 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

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Correspondence: Inquiries to Maureen V. Hill, Complex General Surgical Oncology Fellow, Department of Surgical Oncology, Fox Chase Cancer Center, 333 Cottman Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19111; e-mail: Maureen.Hill@fccc.edu

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus crisis hit at the beginning of the Complex General Surgical Oncology Fellowship (CGSO) and Breast Oncology Fellowship interview cycles. Within 2 weeks, nearly all programs switched to a virtual platform for the remainder of the season. As 1 of the 33 CGSO and 59 Breast Oncology programs, we were forced to adapt to this change quickly, only having 3 weeks to prepare for our first of 2 upcoming interview days. Given that social distancing and the inability to safely travel will remain in place for the foreseeable future, it is plausible that all residency and fellowship interviews will need to be conducted virtually for the next academic year. While there are pros and cons to this method of interviewing, it is clear that both candidates and programs will have their own hesitations.¹ Additionally, since this has not been a traditional platform by which to evaluate a candidate for a program, and for a candidate to evaluate the program, there is little information on its pitfalls and how best to technically conduct these interviews.²⁻⁴ Here we describe our methods and shared experience for conducting our virtual fellowship interviews with the hopes of preparing other training programs for their upcoming interview season.

PLATFORM

We chose to use Zoom as our virtual meeting platform, with standard phone calls as a backup if connections became problematic. Keys for success included a clear schedule, backup phone numbers of all candidates, and clear emphasis to candidates and interviewers about the need to start and complete interviews on time. There are many virtual platforms available for use, but we recommend using the platform with which your faculty and IT staff are most familiar. This will help to minimize technical issues.

PROGRAM INFORMATION SHARING

Candidates were electronically sent additional information about the program, traditionally included in our

welcome packet provided prior to their interview day. This included information on the program rotation schedule, research opportunities, institutional history, benefits, and staff. In addition, links to videos showcasing the campus, faculty, and facilities were distributed. We did not provide the candidates with a virtual tour due to time constraints, but this could easily be filmed and included in the preinterview material. We also sent detailed emails regarding the plans for virtual interviews and Zoom links. This included a clear schedule of the time allotted with each interviewer.

VIRTUAL HAPPY HOUR

The night prior to the interview a 1-hour group “Virtual Happy Hour” session was conducted with the candidates and current fellows. This was an informal, non-mandatory meeting designed to share information about the program without faculty present. Candidates had the opportunity to ask questions of the current fellows and to gather information about the culture and camaraderie of the program. Break out, or smaller group sessions, were not provided; however, could be considered for larger programs to allow for more intimate interactions between candidates and current house staff. We had varied experiences between the CGSO and Breast Programs during these sessions, with only texted questions to the fellows in our CGSO session but more free-form discussion in the Breast session likely due to the slightly smaller size of the group.

INTERVIEW DAY SCHEDULE

The online virtual interview day was designed to mirror our in-person interviews from previous years. It began with the Program Director (PD) and Assistant PD conducting a group session with all candidates where they provided a formal presentation with an overview of the program, in the same fashion as given previously. Candidates had the opportunity to ask questions to the PD’s via the chat function, or at the conclusion of the session. This session lasted 45 minutes and was followed by a 10-minute break.

The individual interviews then commenced. For CGSO, 10 faculty members performed 10 candidate interviews and each candidate interviewed with 5 faculty members, as was standard with our previous interview days. For Breast, 14 candidates interviewed with 7 individual faculty members. Each faculty member remained in their Zoom “room” for the entirety of the interview day and the candidates called into the rooms at their scheduled times. Interviews were 15 minutes in

length followed by a 5-minute break. There was administrative staff on hand providing reminders about time remaining. No group interviews (i.e., 1 candidate with multiple faculty members) were performed as this was not traditionally how interviews were conducted at our program, but such a format could easily be performed.

At the conclusion of the interview day the rank meeting was held with all interviewing faculty virtually after a brief break. This worked out quite well as applicant information was reviewed using screen-sharing on Zoom while we discussed the applicants. In total the interview day lasted from 7:15 am to 1:00 pm for CGSO and 7:00 am to 2:30 pm for Breast, which was the same length or slightly shorter than our standard interview day.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Time Zones – We are an east coast program and starting the interview day at 7:00 am EST proved to be challenging for candidates located on the west coast. Please keep time zones in mind when scheduling your day. One consideration is to have 1 interview day or session occur in the afternoon to accommodate applicants from other time zones.

Technical Challenges – While we did not experience any major technical challenges during our 2 interview days, this was anticipated. The faculty were provided with the cell phone of each candidate on their schedule so that a phone interview could be conducted if the video platform became unstable, to keep the schedule on time. There were a few video streaming issues that intermittently occurred. In cases where connections were severely problematic, the interview was conducted via Apple’s Facetime or standard phone call. It is imperative to have a “back-up plan” in order to conduct timely interviews for all candidates. All faculty conducted the virtual interviews from the same office suite that held 10 individual offices with computers to allow for social distancing. A representative from IT was present for the entirety of the interview in the chance technical questions arose.

CONCLUSIONS

While many programs would not choose to perform virtual interviews, we felt that by conducting them in the methods described above, we were able to closely replicate our “normal” interview day and still understand the strengths of each individual applicant and their candidacy for our program. The limitations to virtual interviews include both the ability to translate an institution’s camaraderie and personality through the virtual

platform, and the inability of the candidate to assess whether they would choose a program in a city where they have not been previously. We feel that it is important for applicants to observe interactions between faculty and between current trainees and faculty if possible. It remains to be seen whether candidates will preferentially choose programs where they have interviewed in person over programs interviewing them virtually, and whether they will also preferentially choose programs located in familiar cities over unfamiliar locations that they were not able to visit.

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