Should virtual Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility fellowship interviews continue beyond COVID-19? Applicant and program directors’ perspectives

OBJECTIVE: As residency and fellowship applications transition to a virtual interview (VI) format, it is important to understand whether VIs provide programs and applicants with adequate information to make well-informed decisions and, ultimately, successful matches. Studies conducted before and early in the COVID-19 pandemic showed that VIs met or exceeded expectations, were more affordable for applicants and programs, and enabled applicants to be away from medical school or residency for less time. Nonetheless, the adoption of VIs was limited before the COVID-19 pandemic. A previous study by the same authors conducted in October 2020 established that Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility (REI) fellowship applicants and program directors (PDs) had favorable experiences and found that their matched program and fellow aligned well with their perceptions based on virtual interviews.

FIGURE 1
Ability of VIs to convey aspects of programs and fellows

Fellows and program directors agreed that virtual interviews provided the ability to gather information on most program and fellow attributes and that, overall, virtual interviews allowed for adequate assessment of their matched program and fellow. In addition, most fellows and program directors found that their matched program and fellow aligned well with their perceptions based on virtual interviews.

FIGURE 2
Perspectives on use of VIs in the REI fellowship application

Two-thirds of fellows and program directors did not think in-person interviews would have changed their rank list; the data presented shows that these fellows and program directors believe virtual interviews should continue and plan to do so in some form in future fellowship applications beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

perceptions of VIs, and the authors have endorsed its continued use. This study aimed to evaluate if first-year REI-matched fellows’ and REI fellowship PDs’ positive perceptions of VIs remained favorable after the 2020–2021 applicant pool started fellowship. Furthermore, this study sought to determine how well VIs reflected different facets of the matched programs and applicants and whether VIs provided an accurate representation of their real-world experiences after working together for several months.

STUDY DESIGN: The previously surveyed cohort of past applicants, now first-year REI fellows, and PDs were sent a follow-up survey 4 months into the academic year (October 2021) to evaluate whether their perceptions of different facets of programs and fellows (personality traits, red flags, and overall fit of their ultimate match) obtained via VIs were accurate. Respondents were queried about their attitudes toward future use of VIs and asked whether in-person interviews would have theoretically altered their rank list. Most responses were ranked on a 5-point Likert scale, where some were yes or no questions. A response of “well” or “very well” denoted agreement with the statement in question. Responses were compared using the Fisher exact test.

RESULTS: Most fellows (30/59, 51%) and PDs (28/48, 58%) responded. Most fellows (76%) and PDs (62%) agreed that overall VIs allowed for adequate assessment of programs and fellows they interviewed with. Most fellows felt that VIs allowed for adequate assessment of their matched program's strengths (81%), co-fellows (86%), faculty (71%), diversity (62%), clinical training (67%), curriculum (52%), and research (52%) (Figure 1). Most PDs felt that VIs allowed for adequate assessment of their matched fellow's personality (91%), strengths (86%), clinical interests (81%), and research interests (67%) (Figure 1). VIs allowed 76% of fellows and 91% of PDs to adequately assess overall mutual fit. Most respondents (62% of fellows and 76% of PDs) felt that “red flags” were adequately assessed using the virtual format. Some factors that respondents felt less comfortable assessing via VIs were clinical facilities, faculty leadership personality traits, and applicant personality traits and charisma or friendliness. Overall, both matched fellows and PDs agreed that VIs allowed for adequate assessment of matched programs and fellows and that their matched programs and fellows aligned well with what was portrayed during VIs (76% and 86%, respectively). Two-thirds of fellows and PDs perceived that in-person interviews would not have meaningfully changed their rank list, although a direct comparison cannot be drawn as in-person interviews were not conducted (Figure 2). Most fellows and program directors found VIs easier to plan for, less stressful, and equal to or easier in ability to rank programs and applicants compared to in-person interviews. When asked about the use of VIs going forward, greater than 90% of fellows and 86% of PDs thought VIs would be an acceptable initial screening step before on-site interviews, although only 57% of fellows and 47% of PDs believe VIs would be an acceptable substitute for in-person interviews. Approximately 50% of both fellows and PDs felt that VIs should continue for all candidates, and 38% of fellows and 30% of PDs felt it should be an option, which was not markedly different than our previous study. Lastly, two-thirds (67%) of PDs plan to use VIs going forward.

CONCLUSION: Matched fellows and PDs surveyed after 4 months of in-person work agree that VIs allowed for adequate assessment of most program and applicant qualities, supporting the previously surveyed favorable experiences. Perhaps quizzically, despite very favorable ratings and the fact that two-thirds of PDs stated that they planned to use VIs for all candidates in the future, only about half of PDs and fellows believed VIs should replace in-person interviews. We suspect that these findings represent discomfort toward the novelty of this new interview modality and that, over time, as data, such as the ones presented here emerges, fellows and PDs will become more comfortable with the notion of replacing in-person interviews altogether. Nonetheless, future studies, including some with a qualitative component, should continue to evaluate VIs and, in particular, how they fit into the fellowship application process going forward.

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