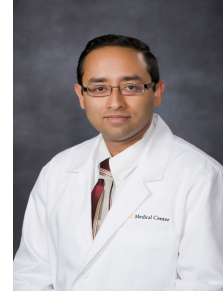


Finding the right job post fellowship: An academic perspective

by: Prithviraj Bose MD



As I look back at a fairly extensive job search successfully completed over a year ago, the memories on the whole are very pleasant, although there certainly were some anxious moments. Hope my experiences help our readers!

I am on an H1B visa and like for many other Indian physicians in that situation, it meant that my six years would expire with the end of my fellowship (3 years of residency and 3 years of fellowship). Without going into the intricacies of immigration law, this meant that I had to find an employer willing to sponsor permanent residency (Green Card) status for me essentially a year in advance of my joining – a somewhat unpalatable proposition for many. A very well known immigration attorney suggested I apply in the EB-1 (exceptional ability) category, but heeding advice from my program director, I chose to stay on the traditional path of labor certification (EB-2), saving a lot of money in the process.

I had always wanted to do academics, but given the above, there was no option but to consider private practice opportunities as well. Starting the middle of my second year, I scoured the classifieds in NEJM and JCO, and spread the net wide. About 6 months and 14 interviews (7 academic and 7 private) later, I finally accepted a translational research track position at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, VA with a focus on acute leukemias.

While all the flying around with the service responsibilities of fellowship was challenging, the interviewing experience was an enjoyable, educational and rewarding one. The groups in the community had relatively few work-related questions, and most of the interview process in that setting involved getting to know each other. Six out of the seven academic centers I interviewed at made offers, and four of these were larger than my home institution, with one being a comprehensive cancer center. While it may be common practice to show private practice contracts to attorneys, I chose not to in my case as the contracts in academics are so standardized.

In terms of what I was looking to do at an academic institution, I have to say that it was hard to home in on a particular area of interest with any degree of confidence. And I cannot emphasize enough how important this was to most of the large universities I interviewed at. This aspect was probably the one thing I found lacking in my fellowship, as we were just not set up in a way that allows each fellow to pursue an area of his/her interest to the relative exclusion of others. Being forced to interview for jobs in my second year made the problem worse. Nevertheless, I knew that malignant hematology was the general area that interested me the most. Narrowing it down further was the problem.

There was considerable pressure from some universities to pursue benign hematology. I toyed with the idea for some time, but then decided against it after discussing it with my faculty. I felt that it might restrict the scope of my expertise, early in my career. Another field I had made up my mind not to go into was stem cell transplantation, but that might just be me. It was remarkable how many prestigious institutions were looking for BMT faculty, but while it fascinates me intellectually, doing it on a daily basis, I think, is a different cup of tea.

What clearly worked with the academic places were, not surprisingly, my publications. I had none during residency (except for meeting abstracts), but fortunately managed to get 3 in major journals by the time I took my main interviews, and was working on a review article, which was published a few months later.

Speaking of the interview, as is well-known, a talk was required at almost all of them (academic institutions). While conventional wisdom might dictate choosing a topic related to one's own research or area of interest, this again was difficult, coming from a program such as ours which encourages a broad range of clinical interests. What compounded the problem was that I had not even begun the research year of fellowship when I took my interviews and therefore, really had no research to present!

The way I chose to get around this was by doing a review of a topic I knew I had a very good hold on, and which would probably not be a particularly common area of expertise for most oncologists. This advice came from my program director, who himself had spoken on thalassemias when he had interviewed for his job at our institution! I spoke on HIT, a disease that has fascinated me since residency, and it did seem to be a hit (pun intended) with the audiences.

Finally, the support of one's own fellowship program is paramount, especially if one is to succeed in getting a good academic position. I was lucky to receive some very strong letters of recommendation from our section chief and other faculty. Overall, I would say the keys to a successful academic job hunt are publications, a good interview day talk, knowing what one's area of interest is, and above all, being a well thought of fellow in a supportive program. The process, especially with visa constraints, is not easy, but then, "a winner never quits, and a quitter never wins".

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