

# Why Do Asian Medical Students Prefer Internal Medicine?

By Steven Kai Ming Lau, National Secretary, 2006 – 2007  
Asian and Pacific American Medical Student Association

**B**y the time this issue reaches medical schools around the nation, another cohort of student physicians will have shifted focus to the next exciting step of their respective careers. The vast majority of these student physicians will learn about their residency apprenticeships via the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), commonly referred to as “the Match.”

Most of us have experienced few life-shaping moments of sheer excitement and anxiety like the revealing of the Match. For some, it feels like an entire career depends on the contents of a single envelope. Therefore, it is interesting to consider how race could play a role in the Match.

Proponents of the Match insist that race does not factor into the process. However, I cannot provide proof or disproof regarding this assessment.

Nonetheless, a recent report from the AAMC describes clear trends linking a student’s race and his or her choice of specialty. For example, approximately 28% of all Asian students match into internal medicine. Although Medicine was the leading specialty choice for each race, every other race chooses internal medicine at a rate of less than 20%. Furthermore, this phenomenon is ongoing. An AAMC survey of all practicing physicians in the United States indicates that Asians specialize in internal medicine more frequently than any other group, including whites. Likewise, the AAMC reports that other minorities choose to specialize in a given field more frequently. The reasons for these trends remain unclear.

One explanation is that minority physicians are more likely to treat minority patients. Minority medical students may attempt to anticipate the needs of their prospective patient populations and choose a specialty that will give them the training to address those needs. This seems like good news for America’s Asian population because enrollment of Asian medical students has steadily increased over the years. According to the AAMC, Asian physicians clearly prefer to practice in states with substantial Asian populations. For example,

roughly 25% of all Asian physicians practice in California.

However, this does not explain the phenomenon of Asians choosing to specialize in internal medicine. In addition, Asian graduates are the racial group least likely (15%) to say they intend to practice in an underserved area. This is in direct contrast to Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander graduates, who are most likely (63%) to say they intend to practice in an underserved area.

Finally, internal medicine residency is a prerequisite for entrance into lucrative subspecialties, and this may factor into the decision of Asian medical students. This cannot entirely explain the trend either, because it begs the question of why Asians prefer the subspecialties of internal medicine to those of surgery or pediatrics.

In the end, individuals should choose to specialize in a field that suits their priorities. Trends with respect to race and the match may generate interesting talking points, but they should not detract from the anticipation of opening that envelope on Match day.

## About the Author

Steven is a third-year student in the Medical Scientist Training Program at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine and national Secretary of the Asian Pacific American



UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN