

RESIDENTS' ROUNDTABLE:
THE PSYCHIATRY RESIDENT'S IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In May, towards the end of the Spring academic calendar, I had the eye-opening experience of meeting in a roundtable discussion with a group of fifteen to twenty psychiatry residents, nearly all immigrants from various New York area hospitals. I was invited by Scott Schwartz, Director of the New York Medical College Psychoanalytic Institute. The residents were enrolled in the College's program in psychodynamic psychiatry.

The question we asked was, what was your experience adapting to the American experience, especially as psychiatrists-in-training?

As one resident said, and which I soon recognized, the stories were the same, yet different. It was a free-wheeling discussion, but residents tended to speak first about their visa status—not their country of origin, their residency class, or their areas of interest within psychiatry. They announced themselves with their visa status.

My own parochial status as a private psychiatrist who never ventures from the confines (yes, confines, as I later began to feel) of my Upper East Side office soon became exposed.

I learned that 35% of residents and early career psychiatrists are foreign medical graduates, many of whom are immigrants.

I learned that most of these residents have a J-1 visa. That means you need to return to your home country or work for an underserved area in the United States for 3 years. Then you can apply for a Green Card. This kind of visa was developed so doctors from other countries could be trained here and then return to their original country, but it has since been modified.

RESIDENT A: I guess I'll start. I came here on a visa 6 years ago when my husband was applying for a CL fellowship. I applied for a psychiatric residency. We had kids, but we had no family support. My husband's fellowship was two hours' distance from my residency program. We rarely had dinner together. Now, we have been apart for five years. It is hard for us—and this will continue for another two years. Our children are with me. We have a very good sitter.

Because of our visa status my husband and I need to meet for about 2 hours every month with lawyers. I am Jordanian and my husband is from the Sudan. Our being here from different countries complicates matters.

Did you know 35% of residents and early career psychiatrists (ECPs) are foreign medical graduates (FMGs).

RESIDENT B: My story is both the same and different. I also started out with nothing to build a life. But unlike 'A', I have a Green Card. That is very different: I can get naturalized.

RESIDENT C: Dr. Ingram, most residents have a J-1 visa. That means you have to return to your home country or work for an underserved area in the United States for 3 years. Then you can apply for a Green Card. This kind of visa was developed so doctors from other countries could be trained here and then return to their original country, but it has since been modified.

RESIDENT D: I am an American citizen. I came here 10 year ago. Nevertheless, I feel lonely. I am retraining here. No matter that I am a citizen—if you are an immigrant, you are always an immigrant. My dream was to be a doctor in America. I accomplished my dream. But I am alone. My family is scattered all over America.

RESIDENT A: You mean I will still feel like an immigrant afterwards?!

RESIDENT D: Always an immigrant!

RESIDENT E: I am from Iran and I have a Green Card. My sister was a citizen. The point I want to make is this: I was an OBGYN in Iran, but I wanted to be a psychiatrist in the US. It's been hard, but I've been happy the whole time. I have been enjoying my life. I am married and my extended family is in California where my husband and I will go.

RESIDENT D: I never said I don't enjoy life—it is the immigrant experience that is so hard. I have accomplished my dream in being here. Please don't misunderstand me.

RESIDENT F: I identify with 'D'—I am the next generation. I speak American English with no accent. My father went through what 'D' is going through. So, I see that. Now, when I leave the country and live elsewhere for a while—I lived in the UK briefly-- I feel homesick for the U.S.

RESIDENT G: I was born and raised here. I went into finance and did well. But I decided to go to medical school. I went to an international medical school. I had different struggles, but I wouldn't change anything. I feel I have purpose and I try to be happy—like 'E'.

DR. SCHWARTZ: I went to an outstanding college here, but I did poorly. I went to medical school in Mexico where I found I could do things. I had freedom. I became a top medieval and renaissance musician. With the group I founded, we became well-known. We played at the White House in 1977.

I regret that I have not been able to do play music as much now as I could then. Also, I have a slight tremor and can't play as I once did. Now, I have turned my attention to early manuscript restoration. I have succeeded to the point that people come to me from all over. And then, there is this program for residents in psychodynamic therapy. And, for sure, I love this class!

It is difficult not just for people from other countries.

RESIDENT D: Here, you need to be very strong. I've been lucky to meet very nice people here. I have a husband and children—everything.

RESIDENT A: Resilience is very important. I've seen people who get sad, who go back to their countries and even become suicidal. Residency directors don't appreciate what we go through. And the residents who come here don't realize how little they know of what they are in for. The residency program directors and department leaders are not fair to FMGs.

RESIDENT D: I love what I do and I love America. I am speaking to the loneliness of the immigrant experience.

RESIDENT H: For me, it has always been about the visa. Always the visa. I came as a student with an F-1 visa. When I applied for residency, about half the programs were closed to me. I'd read at the bottom of an application, something like, "We will not accept you if you are here on any visa." So, I studied for a Master of Public Health. I was feeling very lonely. My sister said I should come to New York. I transferred my student visa to another program. I got an observership—shadowing a physician—which eventually got me into a residency. But it took three years. I went from visa to visa for a very long time. I am still on a visa.

RESIDENT E: As I said earlier, I was an OBGYN in Iran. My father encouraged me to be a OBGYN because women in Iran find it hard to see a man. I was an attending for 12 years. When I applied here, people asked, Why would I do that? Did you have a problem in your country? But I wanted to do psychiatry and not have to run around as a surgeon. Here, because I had a good position in Iran, people were skeptical of me. That made it very hard. So, we all have our problems.

RESIDENT C: Before my residency, I was in a relationship with an American who wanted to marry me. I didn't trust the relationship would really work out. I didn't want to marry him because if it didn't work out, they'd say I married him for a Green Card. So I took the path of the visa. I do understand the loneliness problem. I did marry later and we have children.

SEVERAL RESIDENTS: Who did you marry? Did you marry the same man?

RESIDENT C: Yes.

ALL: Cheers and laughter!

RESIDENT I: Some people who come here don't have a choice—like many of our patients. We had a choice. As long as you have the will and the power you will get there.

DR. SCHWARTZ: We need to draw to a close. My thanks to all of you—and I will see some of you next week at our graduation. The 1st year class will be entering the 2nd year of our psychodynamic psychotherapy program--and I will see you in September. My thanks to Dr. Ingram for recording our discussion and for his work with the Task Force on Psychiatrist Well-being and Support.

DR. INGRAM: I want to add my thanks to Dr. Schwartz's. This was been wonderfully instructive for me. The direction of my professional work has led far away from the world of visas and Green Cards and the matters of concern that you live with day by day. Listening to you this evening, learning of the obstacles you have faced and how you have

overcome them—well, I am filled with admiration for your courage and fortitude. My thanks, too, for your willingness to speak so openly.

ALL: Applause and comments of thanks.