

dear residents

How to Survive the Bureaucracy of Residency Training

July 20, 2025

Dear Residents,

I was scheduled to be on a flight from Frankfurt to Dallas, but it was cancelled because the inbound plane was grounded in Dallas because of weather. I ended up on another airline that took me to Newark, and then I attempted to find someone at Newark airport to help me find another flight to Dallas. No such luck. There were no agents, no friendly face who could have helped me; I was directed to the “virtual agent” on the airline app. I didn’t even try. I found a flight from New York to Dallas and made my way from New Jersey to New York and eventually back to Dallas.

If this had been Pakistan, I would have found a “cousin”, a “brother”, or a “sister” to have helped me, because that’s how it works in Pakistan – everything is a “special favor”, and everyone is related in one way or another. People approach strangers with terms like “brother”, “sister,” or “friend”, and in all honesty, that’s how you are treated. One of the bigger attractions of a life in the US was the anticipation that the “system” was designed to be fair and easier to navigate and not dependent on “special” relationships. An advanced society with a formalized and efficient structure awaited me. I looked forward to escaping bribery, nepotism, and special favors. I anticipated a fair and dispassionate system that would deal with me without causing fear or eliciting feelings of unfairness. It’s called bureaucracy.

The tradeoff from “special” to “standardized” was the replacement of the friendly with the impersonal. You can purchase an airline ticket with a few clicks but troubleshooting a problem can involve all sorts of dead ends in the app, online, or on the phone. It’s maddening because the system doesn’t know who you are; there is no kind or reassuring voice at the other end; there is no one who understands your predicament; and no one who will treat you in the special way that you feel your situation deserves.

The practice of medicine is a deeply personal experience for both you and your patients. We ask open-ended questions, we validate concerns, we explain what we are doing and why we are doing so. We clarify risk, we acquire consent, and keep our patients updated. But that’s where the personal stops. The EHR is impersonal, surfacing warnings, red stop signs, and other dead ends. Prior authorization is the bane of every doctor’s existence. Navigating the revenue cycle management system is remarkably complex and, for patients, understanding their bill is next to impossible.

In residency training, the bureaucracy will find you. You got a taste of it during onboarding, but there is more administrative work headed your way. These include recording your work hours, completing evaluations, passing USMLE Step 3, completing information security and HIPAA refresher training, getting the annual flu shot, TB testing, mask fitting, updating parking registration, ACLS renewal, keeping VA access current, responding to in-basket messages, closing encounters, and completing risk

management training, to name a few. That this layers on an already full plate of work can stress and strain your resources. One of the side effects of the quality of care and patient safety movement has been the inexorable growth of the bureaucracy that supports it. The introduction of HIPAA resulted in large initial and ongoing costs to healthcare systems, as did the adoption of EHRs.

I have urged GME to create a catalogue of what is expected of you and to work with individual hospitals to ease completion of these tasks and remove redundant administrative work. It is a work in progress. We need some apoptosis here, otherwise, administrative neoplasia will overwhelm your primary reason to be here – to learn, to grow, and to become fully capable of independent practice.

Here's some advice on how to navigate the bureaucracy of residency training: simply get ahead of it. Set aside some time each day to complete your tasks. If you find that one or more tasks are particularly burdensome, let me know, and I'll do my best to advocate for their elimination.

I hope you have had a great start to the academic year.

Dino Kazi