

Tips for Orthopaedic Trauma Fellowship Applicants

Choosing a program

There are several factors to consider when choosing an orthopaedic trauma fellowship program. While this might seem like a daunting task, many of the orthopaedic trauma fellowship programs provide an excellent education and foundation upon which to build a career. The OTA website has an updated list of the fellowship training programs, their faculty and a description of the case volume, expectations, and general experience. It is important that you are honest with yourself regarding what is important to you and what trajectory you want your career to take. Your fellowship year is a chance to not only hone in on your skills as a trauma surgeon, but also to start building relationships with mentors that will be with you throughout your career.

- It is important for you to consider what type of training you are interested in for your future. Do you want to be a pelvic/acetabular specialist, deformity correction specialist, peri-articular surgeon, or soft-tissue specialist (e.g., able to do your own gastrocnemius or soleus flaps)? Do you want spine trauma to be part of your training? Will you be taking care of hand injuries as well? In general, are you interested in high-energy level 1 trauma, or is your interest more in deformity correction and cold trauma? These are some considerations, but having some defined goals and objectives for your fellowship experience may help in decision-making.
- Do you want a career in academic medicine, private practice, or a mixture? You may want to experience (or at least interview at) each of these types of programs as you apply for fellowship to make an informed decision, particularly if you are undecided about the practice that you are looking to join.
- Do you want to be in a fellowship program with other trauma fellows? Having other fellows available is a great way to build relationships for the future, but all the fellows need to take into account the global experience. Do you prefer a more individual, apprenticeship model?
- Do you want to apply to a large program with multiple faculty members or do you prefer more of single surgeon type experience? Mentoring relationships can be explored and created in either setting. The quality of the mentorship experience will be important not only during your fellowship, but to your career in the years ahead.
- Certain fellowship programs and institutions are extremely dependent on the fellows in the day-to-day functioning in the delivery of orthopaedic trauma care. Do you want to be at a training program that is fellow dependent or independent? Some programs will give their fellows faculty privileges so they can take primary call, do surgical procedures without the presence of an attending, and bill independently. Some training programs will expect their fellows to take call, round, write notes, evaluate patients in the emergency room, clinic, or on the floor, and dictate operative reports or discharge summaries. Fellow programs definitely place less demands on the fellow, but may not provide a global experience, particularly if you are going to be practicing at a busy university or private practice where some of this will fall on your shoulders.
- Geography can be very important. Most trauma fellowship programs are quite busy and it can be a stressor on the significant other. In which region of the country do you want to spend that year of training? And subsequently, where would you eventually want to settle and build your practice? The AMA database has revealed that most physicians-in-training settle into a region within a 100-mile radius of their last training location. This may or may not apply to orthopaedic trauma fellows. Consider visiting the site or the institution prior to making a decision. If an interview is offered at the site, that might be a better opportunity to interact with fellows and residents and faculty rather than at the OTA. Also inquire if the program has a non-compete clause in their contract. This may or may not impact your decision.
- How important is research in your ultimate career goals? Do you want to train at a program with

a research coordinator, a dedicated clinical or basic science research section, or a site that is participating in multi-center trials? If you are interested in an academic career, learning about clinical and/or basic science research, learning how to write grants, and seeing how an established program functions can be invaluable. If not, a major fellow research expectation might detract from your primary focus.

- If you already have a job after fellowship or are seriously considering offers from a few institutions, what are the needs that you will be filling when you join? Are you going to an institution that is looking for a general traumatologist or will you be doing more specific fracture work, such as pelvis/acetabulum, foot/ankle, or hip or knee reconstruction?

Questions to Consider at the Interview

- What is the role of the orthopaedic trauma fellow in the delivery of orthopaedic trauma care?
- Since you will be interviewing as a PGY-4 and will still be at least 18 months from starting your fellowship, consider asking about the stability of the program, hospital, and faculty. This can be a difficult question to answer as a lot can change quickly. Are there any faculty members planning to retire or actively looking to leave? Are there any plans to hire new faculty or expand the service?
- What is the total case volume and case breakdown? How many pelvic/acetabular cases, long bone fractures, periarticular fractures, nonunions, and deformity correction procedures performed? If something is not up to par, are there plans to send the fellow off site to gain this experience? What is the proportion of blunt versus penetrating trauma injuries and hot versus cold trauma?
- How is the clinic(s) run? What is the clinic schedule? Are you in charge of the resident clinic or will there be staff there? Is there a "private" clinic?
- Will your trauma team have a physician assistant or junior resident to assist with the work? How is the orthopaedic trauma service organized? What is your role on the service?
- Is there a set rotation or service schedule? If there is more than one fellow, is the fellowship experience and training the same for all the fellows (do they work with the same traumatologists and have equal time on the same services)?
- Are there dedicated rotations in some of the subspecialty trauma services (e.g., hand, foot & ankle, spine)? Are there fellows within each of these disciplines who will be competing for the same cases or time with the same faculty member? Are there additional call responsibilities or duties on these services?
- What is the role of the fellow within the residency program? What is the perception of the fellow by the residents? Are there certain cases or clinical experiences that are ear-marked for the residents rather than the fellows?
- What is the call schedule? How much independent call is there versus being on call with the staff? If the staff are on call, how often do they participate in on call cases or are you operating independently? If you are taking independent call, is there back-up faculty or fellow support in place?
- Will your fellowship include rotations at different clinics or different sites? How many institutions will you be responsible for covering? What is the structure of the out-sourcing of cases?
- Is a research project expected and if so, what type of institutional support is available to assist you with research? Is there a list of published and presented manuscripts over the last several years? What projects did the previous fellows undertake and were they able to complete them? Is there dedicated research time?

- What has been the experience of prior fellows? (Ask for names and contact information so you can personally speak to prior fellows.)
- What type of jobs did prior fellows get? Is there a list of the previous fellows available and where they are now?
- What are the educational resources available to you? Is there a didactic schedule, regularly scheduled journal clubs, fracture conference or other teaching sessions?
- Will the fellows be responsible for teaching residents, putting together lectures, or being on faculty at local courses?
- Will you have the opportunity to attend any academic meetings (e.g., AAOS, OTA, a pelvic and acetabular course, etc)? Will the travel expenses be reimbursed? How will coverage of the OR and clinics be handled while you are away?
- Does your contract include a non-compete clause? Have other fellows taken jobs near-by?
- Does your program rely on grant funding?

Before you choose an orthopaedic trauma fellowship program, take time to make this decision and talk to several others before you accept a position. It may only be a year, but it is an important one, that has far reaching implications. It is the year that will most influence your future career directions within orthopaedic trauma.

**For further information regarding fellowships, you are encouraged to look over the [survey results](#) on the bottom of the fellowship page.*