Regarding “Is the Program-Specific Paragraph Responsible for Declining Application Numbers? A Commentary”

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We read the article titled, “Is the Program-Specific Paragraph Responsible for Declining Application Numbers? A Commentary,” with great interest.1 We whole-heartedly agree with the need to determine why otolaryngology–head and neck surgery (OTO-HNS) has been unique regarding the consistent decline in applicants. When examining the data, however, it remains essential to understand the timing and sources available. The Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) updates monthly data during match season, which is more reflective of the number of applicants applying to each specialty at a specific timepoint. The end-of-match ERAS data and National Residency Matching Program data are confounded by applications from the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage change in applicants to OTO-HNS and other highly competitive specialties over the past 5 years.2

Generally, ERAS opens in early June, and applicants submit to programs in early September. During July and August, fourth-year students are doing subinternships in their desired specialty. Therefore, when the Otolaryngology Program Directors Organization released the program-specific paragraph (PSP) statement on August 17, 2015, students had already decided to pursue a career in otolaryngology.1 Thus, it appears that the decrease to 362 applicants in the 2015-2016 match from 438 in the 2014-2015 match occurred before the August release of the PSP. Of note, there was already a decline from 480 applicants in the 2013-2014 match to 438 in the 2014-2015 match, which was the match season before the PSP requirement. Respectfully, we would like to think that those individuals truly committed to otolaryngology would not have been dissuaded by the PSP alone.

Then, the question one must ask is, “How can we determine the reasons for this decline?” As a specialty, we will only gain answers if we ask the right questions to the right people. Thus, we must engage with medical school leadership and medical students to understand opinions regarding our specialty, as well as exposure to our field during medical school. Kaplan et al4 provide a potential starting point, finding that 80% of queried students rated matching in OTO-HNS as “impossible” or “near impossible.” Perhaps, despite similar mean United States Medical Licensing Examination scores, Alpha Omega Alpha status, and number of research experiences, the perception of matching in our field appears more difficult. In reality, the decline in applicants is likely multifactorial, and an evidence-based approach is necessary to identify root causes and effect meaningful change. While it may sound cliché, the future of our specialty is at stake.

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Figure 1. Percentage change in number of applicants compared to Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) 2013 for otolaryngology and other highly competitive specialties (data given are that of US and Canadian medical graduates as of October 15, which corresponds to the year prior to the listed ERAS date, eg, October 15, 2015, for ERAS 2016).2

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References