The Facts About Getting Into an Orthodontic Program

The admissions officer at one dental school recently told me that, when he asked dental school applicants why they were applying to dentistry, the most common reason cited was a desire to become an orthodontist. Similarly, orthodontists are almost universally positive about their vocational choice. What are the facts about gaining admission to this apparently widely liked and desired career?

Before 1997, no one really knew how many applicants to orthodontic programs actually existed. This was because confidentiality rules kept programs from ever sharing information, and no central data bank ever existed. The result was that each program was totally independent and took great pride in the literally hundreds of applications they received every year. The resulting perception was that only a tiny minority of the applicants ever actually got into an orthodontic program each year. In 1997, the Matching Program was implemented, and the actual demographic data on the competition for admission into orthodontic programs became known (Table 1).

Because virtually all orthodontic programs are participating in the match (participation is voluntary), the data in Table 1 show the first real information on the total national picture of applications to orthodontic programs. Several factors seem to be apparent. It is interesting that no remarkable changes seem to have occurred during the first 4 years that the Matching Program in orthodontics has been employed. It is interesting that the number of applicants has stayed fairly constant. Notice that each year about 40% of the total national applicant pool is successfully admitted to an orthodontic program. Moreover, about two-thirds of the applicants admitted were admitted to their first choice in programs.

How does the Match work? According to the National Matching Service, both applicants and programs develop a list of their choices in priority order. Applicants develop their list to include all of the schools they have applied to that they would be willing to attend. The programs develop their list to include all of the applicants they would be willing to accept without regard for the size of their class.

The process proceeds by attempting to tentatively place an applicant into the applicant's preferred program. The choice is tentative because the applicant may be removed from that program to make room for another, more preferred applicant. When this happens and the applicant is removed from a match, an attempt is made to rematch the applicant with the next choice on the applicant's list. This process is repeated until each applicant is matched or the applicant's list is exhausted. A computer is used to facilitate the process, but the process could be done by hand.

No applicant can be matched with a program that is not on the rank order list submitted by the applicant. Similarly, no program can be matched with an applicant who is not on the rank order list submitted by the program. The 3–8 unmatched program positions shown in Table 1 listed no applicant who listed them. This can happen either when applicants or programs make a very short priority list or when programs make specific qualifications for their positions (eg, orthodontics and a PhD). The few unfilled program positions at the end of the match are free to find a match with unmatched applicants outside of the system.

Does this mean that it is really easier to get into an orthodontic program now that the Matching Program has been implemented? Not at all. The dental student network is a very efficient communications system, and the word is out. Students know that it is nonproductive to apply to orthodontics unless their academic record is very strong. Consequently, although the number of applicants is fairly constant from year to year, the quality has become awesome. It is not unusual for a program to have 40–50 applicants each year who rank in the top 10% of their class. Students realize that it is to their advantage to apply to multiple programs, and most students commonly apply to 20–30 programs. This, of course, has the effect of inflating the number of actual applications and giving the perception of more applicants than there really are. We probably are not getting more applicants to orthodontics, but we are getting applicants with increasingly stronger academic records.

It appears that the Matching Program has just formalized the process that was tacitly accepted for many years. The obvious difference is that factual information is available now to help make informed decisions and demographic projections. The indirect advantages accruing are of perhaps even more value. In the old system, some applicants received multiple acceptance offers, and they naturally would wait for the best offer. When they finally made their decision, the programs they ultimately rejected were required to fill that open position with someone usually already accepted by a third program, resulting in a ripple effect nationally. Also, when other applicants became alternate selections a few days later, this gave the applicant the perception of second-class citizenship. Now everyone is a first choice. Of additional immense value now is the fact that all matching programs adhere to the same acceptance prac-

TABLE 1. Number of Orthodontic Programs, Applicants, Positions, and Match Rates During the First 4 Years of the Matching Program in Orthodontics

Year of Start	No. of Match Programs	No. of Applicants	No. of Positions		Applicants Matched, %	Class at First Choice, %
			Filled	Unfilled		
1997	47	553	205	5	37	70
1998	52	578	224	3	39	71
1999	53	548	226	8	41	69
2000	51	556	230	4	41	65

tices; this eliminates possibilities for clandestine arrangements that besmirch the ethics of both the program and the applicant.

What the Matching Program does do is give applicants their highest choice of program, providing that the program in turn also selected them. The other thing the Matching Program does is give each program the applicants of the program's choice, providing those applicants also opted for that program. Isn't this the intent of the application process? It looks like a win-win idea at this point.