

WashU
IMG Wellness



BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR PROGRAM DIRECTORS

By Washington University International Medical
Graduate Wellness Initiative

*How to Support Your
International Medical Graduate Trainees*





INTRODUCTION

International Medical Graduates (IMGs) constitute a significant portion of the trainees in the US. IMGs face similar challenges with many underrepresented minorities in the US including structural racism/bias and systemic barriers. Additionally, IMGs face other unique challenges such as homesickness, visa difficulties, lack of community, language barriers, and adaptation to a new social and work culture. Washington University School of Medicine trains over 100 IMG residents and fellows from all around the world who experience these challenges. Research has shown that the challenges experienced by IMG trainees increase the risk for burnout, isolation, imposter syndrome, and overall decline in wellbeing. Program directors and teaching faculty can support IMG trainees in many ways to help manage these challenges and adapt to their new work environment. The Washington University IMG Wellness Initiative, is pleased to share this best practice guide with program directors to assist them in supporting their IMG trainees. This guide was created by our trainee members and faculty advisors based on feedback from current IMG trainees and existing literature. We also highly encourage program directors to share this best practice guide with teaching faculty in their departments.

-Washington University International Medical Graduate Wellness Initiative



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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **BEFORE** RESIDENCY/ FELLOWSHIP START DATE



Transition Needs

- Familiarize yourself with your International Medical Graduate (IMG) trainee's [visa](#) process such as [H1B](#) and [J1](#) visa. Follow up on your IMG trainee's visa process closely and support them during this stressful process. Be supportive by reminding them that if there is any visa related delay, this is not their fault and the program will make rearrangements for them if needed.
- Ensure that your IMG trainees receive relocation resources including but not limited to:
 - [Driving and transportation](#) (obtaining a driver's license takes time and many IMGs do not have transportation because purchasing a car is challenging without established credit)
 - [GME Transition Resources](#), inclusive of housing, healthcare providers, childcare, and life in STL
 - [GME Well-being website](#) with info on physical and emotional health and other resources
 - [Financial wellbeing](#), [taxes](#), [social security number](#), [opening a bank account](#)
 - Other culture & lifestyle resources: from [APA](#) and [White Coat Investor](#)
 - [Language courses](#) (the cost for ELP course is \$710/credit hour. WashU employed fellows that have been here for 1 year could get a tuition waiver)
 - [ECFMG pre-arrival resources](#) (particularly trainees on J1 visa) and [AMA resources](#) (for all IMG trainees).
- Please introduce the [IMG Wellness Initiative](#) and [GME wellbeing resources](#) to your newly matched IMG trainees. These platforms could be helpful for them to connect with other trainees with similar interests and backgrounds. Encourage your trainees to join the IMG Wellness email and WhatsApp groups (links are provided on the website).



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **BEFORE** RESIDENCY/ FELLOWSHIP START DATE

Work/ Program needs

- Schedule off-campus/site rotations during the later part of the year. It takes at least a couple of months for IMG trainees to get a driver's license and possibly a car.
 - Check in to make sure your IMG trainee is able to get a car. You may need to consider alternative transportation options to off-site rotations.
 - Share information on carshare programs and consider temporary reimbursement of transportation fees to the off-site rotations.
- Many IMG trainees do not have an adequate understanding about their clinical responsibilities as a trainee, medical jargon, interdisciplinary team dynamics, and electronic medical record system (e.g. EPIC) at the beginning of residency/fellowship. They come from different medical systems than the US and it is important for program directors to learn from the IMG trainees about the system from which they came. Consider:
 - Setting clear expectations for rounding, presentations, documentation PRIOR to starting training.
 - Providing resources/tips on effective phone communication with patients' families and consultants (e.g. check item #6 on this [blogpost](#))
 - Providing additional opportunities to practice with EPIC and provide example documentation.
 - Providing preferred clinic/consult note template, and oral presentation template relevant to subspecialty for both outpatient and inpatient settings
 - Having IMG trainees shadow other trainees and/or practice patient presentations
 - Providing a brief list of medical jargon ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)) related to their specialty
 - Developing processes for direct feedback during practice presentations and for EPIC documentation.



Social/ Wellness needs

- Many IMG trainees feel they are looked at as inferior by some members of the healthcare community. We encourage you to highlight and celebrate the diversity and accomplishments of your incoming trainees (language, culture, experience, training, awards, unique hobbies) and spotlight your newly matched IMG trainee(s) on your social media and website ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)).
- Connect your incoming IMG trainee with other junior/senior IMG trainees and faculty at the program. Consider having formal mentoring or buddy pairs if possible, to help guide your incoming trainee through their transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **AFTER** RESIDENCY/ FELLOWSHIP START DATE



Transition needs

- The first 6-12 months can be a challenging time for IMG trainees due to numerous factors, including homesickness, adaptation to a new culture, lack of social support, and lack of knowledge about resources. Acknowledge the many challenges that your IMG trainee faces and appreciate their efforts to perform as well as their AMG peers, despite unique challenges they are experiencing during this transition phase. In addition to supporting and advocating for your IMG trainees, encourage them to use free [GME mental health resources](#) if needed.
- Do monthly brief check-ins with your IMG trainee to see if they need any social and wellness support during this transition process. Have chief residents and senior/junior IMG trainees also check in with the IMG trainees since they may feel more comfortable voicing their concerns to another resident.
- Encourage IMG trainees to use the [IMG Wellness Initiative](#) and [GME wellbeing resources](#). The IMG Initiative has a variety of [recorded seminars](#) on topics such as visas, immigration, physician contracts, financial wellness.
- Provide them with resources (e.g. [SAFE](#), SEMS) in case they face mistreatment due to their nationality, race, culture, accent, appearance, gender, or sexual orientation from patients, family members, staff, peers, and faculty. Reassure them that discrimination is not tolerated and encourage them to be outspoken if they experience any mistreatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **AFTER** RESIDENCY/ FELLOWSHIP START DATE



Work/ Program needs

- Some IMG trainees have a steeper learning curve in the first 6 months of residency. It will take time for them to familiarize themselves with the health system, roles of different team members, documentation, talking with patients' family, calling a consultant, and many other aspects of patient care. It is critical for program directors and faculty to be supportive and provide constructive feedback to their IMG residents regularly (e.g. monthly 15 minutes feedback session) during this adaptation period. Constructive feedback sessions before mid-year would also help program directors to detect issues that can be addressed earlier in training and trainees to comprehend the expectations for mid-year evaluation.
- Facilitate IMG trainees' vacation scheduling process (e.g. allowing them to have 2-week vacation blocks) since they may need to do intercontinental trips and wait for visa renewal appointments. This may also be their only opportunity to spend time with their family and friends in their home country that year.
- Facilitate timely renewal of their visa for subsequent years of training. This includes:
 - Prompt response to GME office when Visa renewal spreadsheet is emailed out in the fall
 - Include all required information
 - Note if trainee has a J2 dependent on a work authorization (needs priority processing of J1 Visa to ensure timely renewal of work authorization)
 - Note if trainee has spring travel planned outside of the US so processing can be prioritized
 - Ensuring accurate completion of paperwork (trainee and PD must complete)

The timing of visa renewal is a significant source of stress for many trainees, especially if they have a dependent who might lose their job if the work authorization does not come through in time (J1 renewal must occur first) or they have scheduled travel plans. Please note, trainees cannot travel and return from countries outside of the United States with an expired J1 Visa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **AFTER** RESIDENCY/ FELLOWSHIP START DATE

Other needs

- Many IMG trainees celebrate holidays other than the major religious and federal holidays in the US. Even a brief holiday celebration message during their cultural holidays can make them feel included and respected. When possible, consider these alternative holidays in schedule requests.
- Encourage your IMG trainees to get involved in leadership or scholarship or award opportunities in their specialty (e.g. [list of trainee opportunities](#) by American Psychiatric Association). Many IMG trainees experience imposter syndrome particularly during the first 6 months-1 year of residency and can be less proactive than their AMG peers.
- Your IMG trainees with J1 visa may be eligible for reimbursement of their yearly J1 fees that were paid to the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates. Contact the GME office to determine if reimbursement is an option.
- Connect them with previous IMG graduates early in residency to help streamline the logistics of practicing in the United States. Most IMG trainees, particularly the ones on a J1 visa, are obligated to do [J1 waivers](#) to work in the US after graduation. This requirement makes their job search more challenging and can be a limiting factor for academic job opportunities. For example, career paths such as research fellowships may not be feasible for an IMG trainee with a J1 visa in their first couple of years after graduation due to 3-year underserved clinical service requirements to complete a J1 waiver.
- If retention of an IMG trainee on faculty is a consideration, discuss J1 waiver options early. Locations eligible for J1 waiver can be checked through the government agency [Health Resources & Services Administration](#). In addition to J1 waiver, departments can consider [O-1 visa](#) for retention of graduating trainees on J1 visa if applicable. Finally, departments can consider green card sponsorship for retention of trainees on H1B visa. For further information about these visa types please review this [page](#).



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