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Radiology Residency in Belgium: The Resident's Perspective

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In the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium, Flanders, there are four large universities where one can pursue studies in medicine: Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Leuven. I am a third-year resident studying radiology at the University Hospital of Leuven. For most students of medicine, radiology is an unknown discipline but with a half-day tour of the radiology department that takes place during the first master year of medicine, the faculty tries to give students a better idea of what radiology is about and why they should be interested. In this article I will share my experiences as a radiology resident.

The Resident's Perspective

It is at the end of the third master year of medicine, which is a full year of apprenticeship in one major and a few minor disciplines in medicine, when students can take their first tentative steps towards choosing radiology as their eventual specialty. Based on your selection during this year and your interests, you can then choose during your fourth and last year in which discipline you would like to continue.

During this apprenticeship year, radiology was not included, but because of my interest in imaging, computers and anatomy I asked if it was possible for me to spend a few days in the radiology department. Though it was a brief period of only a couple of days, this experience cemented my interest in radiology.

Government Imposes Strict Criteria

However, this alone is not sufficient to become a resident in radiology. The Flemish government has limited the number of residents that can study radiology. With this in mind, our department has to select only those students that, in their eyes, best meet these qualifications. Their final decision is based on academic grades from the previous bachelor and master years, the apprenticeship that takes place in the radiology department, an exam in basic radiology concepts and an interview. In your fourth master year of medicine, you work for more than half a year in the radiology department in Leuven University Hospital. So, even before starting your residency you will have already obtained a good basis to start your residency.

If you are accepted as a resident, a five-year residency lies ahead of you. You have the option to spend one or two years of your residency in certain non-university hospitals throughout Belgium. Normally that takes place in the first years of your residency. I followed a two-year residency in the St. Elisabeth hospital in Brussels, where I learned basic radiology such as plain radiography and ultrasound, and also had the opportunity to learn CT and the basics of MRI. This was a good experience and I learned to appreciate radiology even more than before.

The final years of your residency you spend in Leuven University Hospital, where you obtain a broader range of pathology than in the smaller hospitals. During your fifth and last year you can sub-specialise by extra months residency in certain subdisciplines. There is a work rotation system that takes place on a monthly basis (during the fifth year this becomes bimonthly) which means that we will have passed through every subdiscipline a couple of times at the end of the five years.

In the university hospital, the working day normally starts at 8.15am and ends at 6pm. Regularly, we are on call during the evenings, weekends and sometimes spend a whole week doing only night work.

At the moment I am in the second half of my third year of residency. This year we obtain mostly basic radiology training, but CT and MRI training

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is occasionally scheduled. After the second year and final year there are exams. The second year exam is inter-university (only for Flemish universities) and is scheduled after completion of two years of monthly inter-university courses, which are the subject of the exam. The exams in the fifth year are organised separately in each university.

Quality a Key Concern

The government has made regulations about radiology residency in order to ensure that every resident has obtained enough experience in every subdiscipline after the residency period. In my experience, the Belgian residency in radiology is of a good quality and I am looking forward to the career that lies ahead of me.

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