We frequently have 3rd and 4th year vet students rotate through our facility, and some of the questions that usually come up are: “How did you choose your residency?” and “Should I do a year of private practice before my residency?” Students have really liked the food for thought I’ve given them, so here it is:

PRIVATE PRACTICE

This is a highly personal decision, and obviously only you know what is right for you. Being in private practice for a year or two will never hurt your chances in lab animal medicine. Many of the skill are transferrable, such as interpreting radiographs, surgical intervention, managing technicians, etc. You will also hone your communication skills as you educate your clients and explain treatment plans. Your diplomacy and tact will be stretched to the limit. These skills are all useful in lab animal medicine!

However, you shouldn’t feel you need to do private practice first. Many people have gone straight into residencies and have been very successful. Residency programs are designed to give you the skills you will need over the course of the program. Plus, veterinarians are life-long learners…the learning doesn’t stop when we graduate from veterinary school or finish a residency program. We are well prepared to learn new knowledge, skills, and attitudes over the course of our careers.

There are some who feel that they have ‘wasted’ their veterinary education if they don’t do some private practice. I feel that I use a broader portion of my education in lab animal than some of my classmates because I have investigators that are working in oncology, immunology, dermatology, etc. Reading these protocols really makes me think about what I learned in those classes and my residency.

You may also want to think about your student loan situation. Most private practice jobs will pay you more than a residency, so it may be harder to go into a residency after private practice due to ‘living high on the hog.’ One option is to use that year to work hard and pay off your consumer debts and loans and try living on a resident’s salary. Also realize that most lab animal jobs will pay better than private practice, so it may be easier to bite the bullet and continue living like a student for a few more years until you’re done with your residency.

CHOOSING A RESIDENCY

There are many excellent residency programs out there. This article is not an endorsement for any one program. Only you will know which program(s) feel right to you. What I do recommend is choosing a training program that is recognized by ACLAM. Otherwise, you’re essentially only getting credit for the years of experience!

PHD, MASTERS, OR NO DEGREE?

Read through the descriptions on ASLAP.org closely. You will be able to tell if the program is more clinical in nature or research in nature. Folks who want to do a PhD usually are pretty sure they want to do this. The programs that are known for being heavy in the PhD arena are Missouri and Johns-Hopkins. This does NOT mean that other programs don’t grant PhDs. If you are interested in a particular program, ASK!

Many of the residency programs also grant degrees in Laboratory Animal Medicine, Laboratory Animal Science, or another basic science. Some folks want the degree, some don’t, but as a friend of mine is fond of saying, if you’re going to do the work, you might want to have another degree to show for it.

LOCATE

You can use geographical location to sort where you might want to spend a few years…try another part of the country! Some people want to be near family…other people want to be on the other side of the country from family! Some people will want to go skiing on the weekends they’re not on-call; others shudder at the thought of snow. Just make sure you can afford to live on a resident’s salary wherever you choose.
LENGTH

Residencies last anywhere from 2-4 years. Some folks will find 2 years to be very intense, but they are dying to get out there and be a clinical vet! Others want the extended mentoring that would accompany a 4 year program. I would recommend talking to different people about how long their programs were, and if they would have liked a shorter or longer program, and why.

CURRICULUM

ACLAM requires training programs to include a didactic component consisting of seminars or courses with at least 200 hours of direct faculty involvement during the course of the training program. You will want to talk to current residents or alumni to find out what this really means for the programs you are strongly considering. Are the residents self-teaching? This style is preferred by some learners, is analogous to problem based learning, and can be excellent board preparation. Other programs have the faculty presenting most of the coursework. This is consistent with how many of us learned in vet school. Only you will know what approach works best with your learning style.

PROJECT

The research project and manuscript is one of the reasons that many veterinarians pursue a residency program, as projects and project support can be harder to obtain if you are working in a full time non-resident position. Residencies are supposed to have a mentored research experience. Talk to current residents, faculty, and alumni about the projects, the support, and their lab experience in general. Ask faculty what their research interests are. See if any of these things sound interesting to you. It’s also OK to have an idea of what you’d like to do. It’s also OK to not have a clue!

HOURS

Hours in residency programs vary greatly. Find out if you’ll be working 40 hour weeks or 80 hour weeks. Find out how often you will be on call. Talk to the residents and find out how exhausted they are or aren’t.

FACULTY

Make sure you take the time to visit each facility to which you are considering applying. You need to see if you feel comfortable around them or not.

ALUMNI

Make sure you talk to alumni of different programs. Ask them what they liked about their program, and what they didn’t like. DIG!!

ROTATIONS

During your senior year of vet school, try to visit at least 3 different facilities for a rotation. These are essentially 2 week job interviews. The facilities will assess if you are personable, bright, motivated, easy to get along with, etc. Make sure you treat the front office staff, husbandry staff, and veterinary technicians with respect, as they are frequently part of the job interview process. They will speak up if you do something unkind or unfair, as they won’t want to clean up your messes for the next 3 years...and there are plenty of other folks out there to fill the spot.

BOARDS

ACLAM has done surveys over the years, and passing the boards comes down to individual drive and ‘time at task.’ There are no residency programs that have a higher pass rate than other programs, and there is no evidence that people who do a residency pass the exam more frequently than those on the experience route.

SUMMARY

If you are interested in a program but don’t know the faculty or an alumni, ask the lab animal vets you do know if they know someone from that program and can put you in touch with them. Odds are that they either know someone, or one of their friends will. Most people are really proud of their training program, and love to talk about it, so don’t be afraid to ask! Hopefully this has helped answer many of your questions about lab animal medicine residencies, and the different ways you can choose a program.