

Trauma and Orthopaedics ST3 Application Process

Intro

The ST3 application process is becoming more and more difficult each year with increasing competition ratios and high interview score cut offs across all specialities. Trauma and orthopaedics unfortunately remains one of the most competitive specialities for ST3 applicants. The whole process often leads to anxiety and stress for resident doctors who are already overworked and many on the brink of burn out.

With a reported >800 applications this year (cannot find written confirmation of this at present), up from 522 in 2024, the pressure on the recruitment team is also as intense as ever. This, coupled with a reduced number of training posts nationally compared to last year (unsure exact numbers at present), has dramatically increased the competition ratio. This has driven up the portfolio score cut off for interview shortlisting. The knock-on effect is that many applicants, the vast majority of who would make excellent ST3 T&O registrars, are falling at this shortlisting step and so are not having the opportunity to shine in the interview and secure an NTN.

The interview itself is still being delivered remotely, a change which has stuck post-pandemic. This has advantages, both for the recruitment team and interviewers as it reduces cost and time spent by consultants travelling to F2F interviews. For applicants, it also has the advantage of reduced travel costs, and even the ability to conduct the interview from overseas, but sacrifices the ability for applicants to shine in person as well as the previous surgical skill station no longer being examined. The impact of losing this practical station on candidate selection is yet to be known.

The overall quality of applicants is very high, resulting in the score range of those who are offered an NTN being very narrow. This results in huge swings in rankings with very small differences in points (1 point out of the 234 on offer could result in a change of up to 10 ranking positions).

Portfolio

Applicants will spend years working towards this. Some points are much easier than others to gain, some are unachievable for many (PhD, maximum points for publications etc). It is therefore important to be efficient and focus on low hanging fruit early, while also choosing some harder to achieve points to work on over a longer period of time (one or two publications depending on time available for example).

Many people historically felt that the aim was to just achieve the points required to shortlist for interview. However, recently, this has caught some off guard as the jump up in points required for interview was so steep, but also the number of ranking places that each point counts for can be very significant and 1 or 2 points the difference between a number or not. Therefore, maximising portfolio points is now vital.

Benefits:

- The portfolio has not dramatically changed for a few years
- Numbers of operations not unattainable but an amount that shows a good level of experience and commitment to specialty, this number is increasing
- Good spread of areas, allowing candidates to show they are well rounded, while not overly penalising candidates if they are weak in one or two areas

Cons:

- This years shortlisting score has meant that significant points scored in the academic section is now required for an interview, something which will vary by geography
- N-number, although as a concept is beneficial to prevent candidates taking years out of training scoring very highly, now makes it difficult for anyone with an N score of >2 of securing a number due to the vast amount of academic work required to overcome the shortlisting score
- This requirement for academic points may encourage trainees to publish research in low impact journals which charge large fees, often thousands of pounds, unfortunately burdened by the trainee themselves. High quality research projects are often harder to become involved in, far more time consuming and often take years to publish

Interview format and tips for revision

Interview resources

- Saturation of resources now available. Some are free, some very expensive, ranging from low quality and time intensive, to high quality and high yield.
- Practising potential interview scenarios with local consultants, SpRs and colleagues remains a productive way of preparing.

Four stations each 10 minutes in length, strict time cut off

1. Commitment to specialty

- Try to organise your top highlights from your CV in your head and prepare answers that can focus on these achievements and demonstrate how good your achievements are. CAMP is a good structure to practice
- Typically, the station starts with an open question which allows you to talk about your biggest achievements. It is your time to shine, don't be too modest but make sure you get your points across.
- This is then followed up with situational type questions and some questions that test your awareness of T&O topics/issues
- Practice scenario-based questions using structures such as STAR
- Think of a few examples that can highlight your strengths and why you will make a good T&O registrar

2. Clinical, 2x 5-minute stations

- Question banks are useful for this
- Need to practice a good opening dialogue that encompasses ATLS / CCRISP style scenario in a succinct way (aim for complete ATLS assessment verbally within 20 seconds)
- These scenarios are very time pressured, especially if you are wanting to gain the higher marks
- Work on giving succinct answers that say a lot in a short space of time

3. Prioritisation

- Question banks also useful for this station
- Very time pressured, need to practice how to quickly ask questions and gain relevant information whilst remembering that information for the end of the station
- You do not need to get to the 'end' of this station, it is testing your ability under pressure
- Prepare for this by attending trauma meetings, practise managing the list during on-calls.

4. Communication

- The newest of the stations so currently the hardest to revise for as the format seemed to change this year compared to last year
- Focus on general principles of safety within T&O. If given a strange scenario, take a few seconds and think of what principles are being tested, and make sure your answers are safe. E.g. don't be afraid to escalate concerns, duty of candour, staff wellbeing etc.

The interview is very time pressured and therefore tests the candidate's ability to think quickly on their feet and how they react in stressful situations.

Give yourself plenty of time to revise and practice for this interview (everyone will be different depending on how much time you can commit each day, and your T&O experience and knowledge going into it, but ~3-6 months of exam focussed prep give or take is a rough guide). Start on learning/revising the theory for clinical and some of the principles for communication and commitment to specialty. But the key is to practice talking and answering questions out loud. Try to find a study partner(s) to practice with, as you will be able to keep each other honest and listening to others and giving feedback is a fantastic way to improve your own answers.

Find registrars and consultants at work who can give you mock questions (registrars who have been through it in recent years are the most useful). This is invaluable, and the more honest they are with feedback the better. Not knowing answers to questions and looking foolish in front of your colleagues feels horrible, but it will greatly improve your performance at the real interview. Furthermore, be sure to practise with a range a consultants and senior colleagues. It is tempting and comfortable to practise with the same people every time, but this is often less helpful for fabricating the pressure of the real interview. Revise your cross-sectional anatomy of key topic areas for the clinical stations. Don't panic if you get something you have no idea about/never seen, you will not be alone. Speak calmly and approach the situation with patient safety as top priority, remember basic things like early escalation to consultant if required. Don't say things that you wouldn't actually do in real life just to impress the panel, they are looking for a safe and sensible first day SpR.