

AO Spine Europe and Southern Africa Short-Term Fellowship Guidelines 2023

Introduction

Quality, consistency and academic qualification are key elements to a fellowship program. To ensure we achieve these criteria it is necessary to reaffirm the principles and guidelines for AO Spine Europe and Southern Africa (AO SESA) fellowships.

Aims

The purpose of an AO SESA fellowship is to provide additional experience for trained orthopedic surgeons and neurosurgeons interested in spinal surgery. It is the responsibility of the host Center to ensure that the fellow becomes conversant in the principles, indications, planning, techniques and complications of spinal surgery and develops the hands-on surgical skills for general spinal practice. Fellows are expected to enthusiastically immerse themselves in all aspects of the program offered by the host Center.

AO Spine Centers

Short-term fellowships are offered in official AO Spine certified Spine Centers (further details on the AO Spine website), namely hospitals or clinics throughout the regions. Applicants must choose and prioritize a minimum of 2 Spine Centers, which increases their chances of being accepted. However, the final decision regarding choice of AO Spine Center will be made based on the number of applications and availability of the AO Spine Center.

A fellowship cannot take place in an AO Spine Center where the fellow already works, or in a hospital that is not certified as AO Spine Center.

Duration

AO Spine offers short-term fellowships that range in **duration from 2 weeks up to 8 weeks**. In case the fellow would like to do a 12-week fellowship, the additional 4 weeks must be self-financed by the fellow and approved individually by the Spine Center.

Applicants, whose score does not give access to a fellowship with stipend, will be offered the possibility to attend a self-financed fellowship. This means that, upon specific approval of the Spine Center, the fellow will be able to attend the Center at her/his own expenses. The program will be identical to that of fellowships with stipend and at the end a Certificate will be released under the same terms and conditions. The reason to offer this possibility is, given the limited resources available for economical support, to maximize the training opportunities for applicants.

Support

An AO SESA stipend for each fellow will be transferred to the bank account of the fellow once the fellowship has started, based on availability of the required budget. If a regular bank transfer is not possible, additional fees (e.g. for a Western Union transfer) will be deducted from the fellow's stipend. The stipend is calculated based on the current

World Bank Purchasing Power Parity in order to cover the costs for food and accommodation in the host country. All travel expenses are the responsibility of the fellow or sponsor.

Some Centers provide simple accommodation for the fellow. If family or hotel housing is required, arrangements must be made privately by the fellow directly (AO Spine will not provide any support in arranging accommodation).

Fellowship application

The fellowship application form for the following year opens on July 3 and closes on August 31. Fellows are kindly asked to use the online application form published in the AO Spine website.

Applications will only be accepted via the official application form on the AO Spine website. Incomplete applications will not be considered and will be rejected automatically

An AO SESA short-term fellowship is granted at the discretion of AO SESA, based upon the candidate's application and experience. Successful candidates must meet the following criteria:

- Be a current member of AO Spine
- Be a spine physician (or in-training, but at least in the 4th year as resident in the specialty), or specialized in orthopedics, neurosurgery, or trauma surgery with a strong interest in spine surgery.
- Speak and understand English, or the local language where the AO Spine Center is located.
- Submit a complete online application form and required documents in time (July 3– August 31)
- Have previously participated in an AO Spine Course.
- Have not participated in any other AO fellowship within the past three years (from the date when the application is handed in)

Required documents

- Letter of motivation
- Curriculum vitae (including list of publications)
- Copy of medical diploma (if in 4th year of residency) or specialization diploma (neuro/ortho)
- The most recent AO Spine event certificate
- 1 recommendation letter from a senior surgeon (signature and contact details)
- Copy of passport
- English proficiency (certificate or self-statement of competency)

Scoring and decision

All applications that fulfill the criteria are forwarded to the respective Country Council for their advisory feedback. If the feedback to their best knowledge and conscience does not contain any fact-based reason to exclude an applicant (e.g. due to false declarations), all applications will be scored and ranked through measurable indicators, which are:

- AO Spine history: Consecutive years of paid AO Spine membership, participation in AO Spine courses, participation in other AO Spine events, Faculty in AO Spine events
- Expected career: Age (no exclusion due to age; however, certain age ranges will be scored differently), quality of letter of motivation, strong interest in spine surgery, well defined goals for fellowship, commitment of future engagement with AO Spine
- Past achievements: Publications (non-spinal topics or non-impacted journals), publications in impacted journals, participation in financed research projects
- Social relevance: Applicant works in a low-income country (according to the World Bank), or area with lack of spinal care

The AO SESA Community Development Officer will examine the application and the candidate will be contacted with a decision. This process may take up to 4 months after the submission deadline of August 31.

Coordination & contact

All fellowships are organized by AO SESA. Direct arrangements between candidate and Center are not permissible. Please contact fellowshipsEU@aospine.org in case of any questions.

Confirmation & changes

AO SESA must receive confirmation of acceptance by the applicant within one month after a fellowship has been offered. The arrangement is then considered binding. If no response is received within one month, AO SESA will be free to reassign the fellowship to another candidate.

Any subsequent wish for change of timing or location may jeopardize the fellowship. Furthermore, if a fellow cannot fulfill the requirements set out in this document, AO SESA may consider early termination of the fellowship.

If a fellow fails to participate to an agreed level or has compromised the learning experience through failure to attend the Center, no certificate will be awarded and future tenures through AO SESA may be jeopardized.

During the fellowship

The fellow is expected to follow the daily routine of the Spine Center and should be available for emergencies at night and on weekends. AO Spine fellowships are usually considered to be observerships. Thus, active participation as a scrubbed assistant may be possible, but cannot be guaranteed. In case a fellow may be allowed to assist operations scrubbed in, the fellow will not be permitted to perform surgery for legal reasons.

Fellows will not be insured against accident, illness or malpractice through either AO SESA or the Spine Center. It is the responsibility of each fellow to ensure that their medical insurance covers medical treatment in foreign countries. Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that the fellow takes out malpractice insurance prior to starting the fellowship.

Some Spine Centers suggest, by way of an introduction, that fellows give a short presentation to staff. This can be on a subject or topic with which the fellow is familiar or actively involved. We recommend that fellows communicate with the AO Spine Center upon confirmation of fellowship to enquire about this.

English is spoken by medical staff at many Spine Centers. However, some staff members and patients may only speak their mother tongue, and staff meetings, ward rounds and outpatient clinics may be held in local language. Therefore, it is advisable to acquire some knowledge of local language before the fellowship begins, allowing for better communication and integration. White coats may be provided by the Spine Center, however, to be sure please check this prior to starting the fellowship.

Evaluations

The AO SESA short-term fellowship program can only develop with the help of constructive and honest feedback from each fellow. Following completion of the fellowship, an evaluation form must be completed through the online tool within one month. This is a mandatory requirement for each fellow to receive the AO SESA fellowship certification. This form may be shared with the AO Spine Center and the AO SESA Community Development Officer.

The AO Spine Center is also required to complete an evaluation form upon completion of each fellowship, which may be shared with the AO SESA Community Development Officer.

Applicants agree to the terms of this Guidelines as well as to the Data Privacy Policy of the AO Foundation. Applicants agree and accept to have their data and documents shared with all stakeholders involved in evaluating the application and allocating the fellowship. In case a fellowship is granted, the data and documents will also be shared with the host clinic. Applicants agree and accept the process of selection and allocation of fellowships without the possibility to object decisions taken by AO Spine.