

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



On July 1 of this year, I was asked to take over as the fellowship program director of Georgetown's Hematology and Oncology Fellowship Program. This opportunity has provided me with all sorts of new perspectives on a system that has evolved greatly over the years. The fellowship selection process has irreversibly changed since the time I went through it, and mostly for the better.

I was recently waxing reminiscent in the company of a few current fellows about my most memorable interviewing experience, which took place about 40 years ago (yes, I am that old). I had attended medical school at Tufts, where I was extremely impressed by Robert Schwartz, the chief of hematology at the time. I recalled the day in the late 1960s when he stood in front of the church across from the school and gave a marvelous, impassioned anti-Vietnam War speech during a protest rally. I had sat in the front row, as I always had during his lectures, in awe of his intellect, humor, and eloquence. Thus, after an internship and residency at the University of Virginia Hospital, I was keen to return to the Tufts program as a fellow under Dr Schwartz.

During my interview tour along the East Coast, I stopped off at Duke University, which had—and has now—an excellent training program. There, I was interviewed by the division chief, an eminent hematologist named Wayne Rundles. He offered me a position on the spot, and I replied that I was waiting to hear from Tufts. In his gentlemanly Southern manner, he insisted I call Bob Schwartz immediately to tell him that Duke wanted me. So, I picked up the office phone in his presence, dialed the number, and actually reached Schwartz himself. When I informed him of the Duke offer, he told me there way no way I should go there, and that he would accept me into his program. I said my thanks to Dr Rundles, and the rest is history.

This type of decision-making is no longer an option, as the final decision is now made via an electronic matching system—although we still interview the top candidates and rank our choices. About 2 months ago, I reviewed 200 applications (filtered from the 350 or more we received). From these, I selected 51 applicants to invite for an interview (5 from our own institution) in order to fill 4 slots. We scheduled 2 to 5 interviews per day on a series of Thursdays and Fridays, and 2 to 4 of my colleagues met with each of the candidates on those days (as did I). Each morning, I gave a brief PowerPoint presentation about the

institution and the enormous changes we had recently implemented in our program.

I do not know why this surprised me, but the diversity in candidates was enormous. I could have spoken to certain candidates all day, whereas with others just 6 minutes seemed like an hour. Many were incredibly engaging and poised, while I could not count the number of *um*'s from others. Everyone wanted to go into "academics," but few had a clear idea of what that involved. When asked what they would bring to our program, the less substantive ones responded, "I am a hard worker"; at least one had the insight to follow that up with, "but I guess we all are." Others described their unique skill sets or experiences. When I asked, "Why Georgetown?" the response "I have family/friends/a fiancée in the area" scored no points. The applicant who confused us with George Washington University Hospital may have better luck over there in the future.

Several applicants had the foresight to look online for the type of research conducted at our institution and knew the names of members of our cancer center who they wanted to be able to communicate with about potential research collaborations. When I asked the applicants what they wanted to be when they grew up, or where they thought they would be in 10 years, a few had distinct goals and others lacked any vision.

My final interviewee was the one who gave me the response I sought; he said he wanted to do something that would make a difference. When I asked applicants who had already been interviewed by a few of our faculty members if they had additional questions, the winners still fired away. The losing response was, "no, they have all already been answered." My advice? Feign interest if you must, but seem inquisitive!

The impressive number of exceptional young doctors we interviewed this year gave me a sense of hope for the future. I eagerly await that day in December when we find out with which ones we will have the opportunity to help realize our shared goals.

Until next month...

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Bruce D. Cheson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bruce D. Cheson, MD