

Interviewing Season

It is that time again: the interviewing season for prospective fellows. I think I should run a course for those writing letters of recommendation, as well as one for the applicants. Obviously, this year's group did not read the letter I wrote on the subject last year.

For example, faculty members who take responsibility for sponsoring their young charges need to be a bit more honest so we can separate the best from the not-the-best, given that the residents all seem to be in the top 1% to 5%. The poor young man whose program director was honest and rated him as only in the top 25% of his group never had a chance. It is particularly disturbing when there are multiple candidates from the same institution with almost identical letters from the same person. Furthermore, please proofread what you write. I could not control my laughter the other day during the interview of a young woman who was reportedly "elf-motivated." I looked around, but found no evidence of the little sprites.

Applications should suggest that the individual has interests that go beyond the scientific and clinical; personal interests should make someone stand out. After last year's list of hobbies and interests provided food for laughter, I made a point of recording some of the best from this year. On the bottom were several people who listed none at all. The hit parade included "eating seafood," "everything about the universe," bonfires, reading laundry trade magazines, and horology (which is the art or science of measuring time; arcane, but actually not bad). One person I interviewed the other day wrote that he collected stamps, which is what my mother made me enter onto my college applications, and I never forgave her for it. The winner, however, was (drumroll, please . . .) recycling.

If I ran my course, I would conduct mock interviews and encourage the young physicians to provide more thoughtful answers to fairly obvious questions, such as why they want to come to our cancer center. An in-house resident stated that he just felt comfortable here. The most frequent response is because the person has family, or a boyfriend or girlfriend, in the

area. As you might imagine, I would prefer something about the quality of the science, the excellence of our teaching and mentorship program, the opportunity to participate in innovative clinical research, or the like.

When I make my introduction at the beginning of each interview day, I suggest to the 4 candidates in their interview suits that they ask whatever questions will help them decide if our institution is the right one for their career goals, and to avoid stating that they have already asked everything they needed to know during prior interviews that day. Nevertheless . . .

On the other hand, sometimes an inquiry is worthy of a more thoughtful response. I was taken aback the other day when a young chap asked me what life lessons I try to impart to my fellows. I reflected for a moment, and related the three that immediately came to mind.

Number 1, you can learn from people just as much about how not to behave as about how to behave.

Number 2, do not believe everything your attendings tell you, and question why—just because something has always been done a certain way does not mean it is correct. (The example I gave was the unnecessary bone marrow biopsies in the routine staging of Hodgkin and diffuse large B-cell lymphomas.)

For number 3, I told him to always remember the words of Kenny Rogers. When he gave me a deer-in-the-headlights look, I used my iMac to play him a download of "The Gambler," which contains the sagest piece of advice in music: "you got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." I hope he left the interview a wiser young man.

Until next month . . .



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