

The College

Training day for College Assessors on Advisory Appointments Committees

JOHN ROBERTSON, Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey KT19 8PZ

College Assessors on Advisory Appointments Committees (AACs) raise recurring issues in their completed reports returned to the College. It was decided to bring these matters together with a College Assessors' training day. It was held in May and heavily oversubscribed. Further training days are planned for the future.

This is a personal summary of the questions raised and some of the guidelines emerging from that day's meeting.

The theory

Colleges and Faculties have always sought to influence consultant appointments. Standards are not rigid. They vary between specialties and with supply and demand. College guidelines carry no legal force and are only accepted in so far as they are reasonable. Their purpose is to maintain and raise the standards of clinical practice and to ensure that candidates not suitably trained are excluded. This is principally achieved through:

- (a) Regional advisers and sub-specialty representatives
- (b) College assessors on AACs.

Regional advisers, with the assistance of regional representatives, have a key role in drafting job descriptions. Their advice is usually taken but it need not be. The job description then becomes the basis for recruitment. Once issued to enquirers it should not be altered unless a revised version is sent out as well. Once applications are closed no substantial changes should be made. The job description is a management document, defining the job that the health authority needs to have done. It is the property of the health authority. It must be drafted to a high standard or recruitment problems will result. Worse, the appointee may be unable to develop the post properly. This means that it is best written by consultants detailing all the resources and their locations and listing all supportive staff. This includes the allocation of trainees and any future proposals with the implementation of *Achieving a Balance*. Over-optimistic plans for future develop-

ments must be avoided. It is helpful if the Jarman indices are quoted. Any academic component should be clear and agreed by the local academic unit. In the case of self-governing trusts the details of pay and conditions must be carefully spelt out since Whitley Council regulations will not apply. "Job Plans" will be required in the future.

College assessors are drawn from lists supplied by the Chairmen and Secretaries of Divisions and Sections. Nominees should be from another Region and from the specialty or subspecialty in question. The assessor's first task is to check the job description in consultation with the regional adviser who may provide additional background information. The assessor then draws up a short-list in collaboration with the other members of the AAC. Any disagreements about the job description or the short-list should be settled at this stage and not at the appointments committee.

The College assessor and the Appointments Committee

The legal requirements for appointments are fairly stark and are set out in the Statutory Instrument 276/1982, amplified by Circular HC (82)10. The law does not prescribe any specific standards for higher qualifications or degrees, or accredited training or research experience. 1975 legislation allows any EEC doctor to set up practice in the UK. In effect the NHS sets its own standards through the AACs and hence is strongly influenced by College guidelines. But any failure to observe the law could lead to an Industrial Tribunal or the Courts. The Statutory Instrument does specify the composition of the AAC; that is, two lay members and five professionals of which only one need be a psychiatrist. With the NHS Amendment Regulations 1990, the general manager of the district will be included as a full member of the AAC. A quorum allows one lay and one professional member to be absent. An officer also has to be appointed to keep a confidential record and this may be used in evidence. Proceedings are strictly confidential. The purpose of the Statutory Instrument is to protect

patients and to ensure a competent and safe appointment without prejudice or discrimination. Most health authorities now follow a policy of equal opportunities.

The employing authority can object to an appointee nominated by the AAC but cannot appoint someone not interviewed. A majority decision is permitted but no veto is allowed. The Chairman has an equal vote but usually abstains. If the nominated assessor is in dispute with his colleagues he can supply a minority report to the RHA or the Committee can be asked to postpone its decision and reconvene after further consultation. His objections can be minuted and he can amplify this in writing to the HA Chairman with a copy to the President of the College. The four year requirement for higher psychiatric training is not an inviolate rule, but attitudes are hardening. Proleptic appointments should not be made.

In practice

The problems for College assessors trying to maintain or improve standards can be readily listed:

- (a) small or shortage specialties
- (b) unpopular locations
- (c) the short-list
- (d) impossible jobs
- (e) unconventional training
- (f) university posts
- (g) the locum consultant in post
- (h) the local favourite
- (i) counselling unsuccessful candidates.

Small or shortage specialties often present difficulties in recruitment, especially when general and higher psychiatric training in that specialty is scarce. Many of these posts are unfilled and AACs may not meet for lack of suitable applicants. Frustration may impel an AAC to appoint a candidate with little higher training and even less in that specialty. Assessors should remember that the successful candidate may have to set up a new service.

Unpopular locations also present recruiting problems. It is not always clear why they are unpopular. Discussion with the regional adviser may shed some light. Again the College assessor may be under great pressure to appoint. In such cases, it is important to realise that any drop in standards will only compound the problem.

The short-list may be all too short and hence there is a temptation to pad it out with unsuitable candidates. The assessors should only short-list candidates who fulfil College guidelines.

Impossible jobs should become evident before the AAC meets. It may be clear from the job description or from discussions with the regional adviser. Hence the importance of doing homework beforehand.

There may be excessive travelling or it may be a "hybrid" post or one without adequate supporting staff.

Unconventional training These candidates are often from overseas. "Reciprocity" in general training only applies to the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their exams are regarded as equivalent to the MRCPsych. However, theirs are exit qualifications and two additional years as a consultant would be recommended as equivalent to a senior registrar post in the UK. There is no recognition for general or higher training anywhere else. At present no EEC qualifications are recognised as equivalent to the MRCPsych, which covers training in the UK and the Irish Republic. DPM is not a substitute of MRCPsych.

University posts The successful candidate will usually become an honorary consultant. They should have no more than five clinical sessions and the research role is central to the job. They will need a good *recent* track-record of publications together with the zeal, energy and drive to obtain grants. In the current climate, a proven ability to raise money is paramount.

The locum consultant in post All too often these are hard-working worthies who have failed to progress, usually because of insufficient general or higher training. These are some of the real casualties of our service, often exploited and hard to counsel. Staff grade posts may provide the only solution. For senior registrars, up to three months as a locum consultant can be a valuable experience but little can be gained beyond that.

The local favourite These candidates should not be underestimated. After all, "the face fits". The assessor should guard against unfair discrimination or possible violation of equal opportunities. If he is in dispute with his colleagues, he should follow the procedures set out above.

Counselling unsuccessful candidates This is an unenviable task made harder when an exceptional candidate has been appointed. It is important to bear in mind that what happens behind closed doors is confidential. Any hint of prejudice could lead to litigation later.

Postscript

- (a) Reply immediately to a request from the College to attend an AAC. It may not be easy to find a quick substitute.
- (b) Contact the Regional Adviser and discuss the job description beforehand.
- (c) Complete the questionnaire afterwards. Collation of these provides the College's hard data for presentation to the Department of Health to ensure the correct balance of training posts.