

Trainees' Forum

Better Luck Next Time

Mistakes to avoid in becoming a senior registrar

NEIL MARGERISON, Senior Registrar, Napsbury Hospital, Hertfordshire

You have passed the MRCPsych. Well done.

Now it is time to leave the rotation and make way for someone else. Suddenly you are running out of time. Could you really end up unemployed? Or become a never-ending locum?

Thoughts such as these become daily companions after one or two interviews—or after several applications without being shortlisted. If you are to survive, you will need to draw on your personal resilience and courage—and that of your family as well.¹

Take it seriously. Treat it like 'the exam'. Take a lot of trouble with your CV. If you don't get it right, you won't be shortlisted. Make sure it is typed.

One example of a CV is in the BMA *'How To Do It'* book.² Take your version to your Senior Registrar or Consultant. If they don't suggest any constructive changes, take it to someone else.

Never simply fill in the application form they send you. After completing the basic information, you should refer to the relevant pages of your CV—that's why you have spent all this effort in making it just right. You should not make your CV over-elaborate. You can emphasise your suitability for some particular post in a covering letter.

Don't try to cut corners. I was told after one interview that I was not taken as a genuinely serious candidate because my references were aimed towards a different post. I had applied for two posts in my own hospital one after another. I cancelled my first application after checking out the job, but I accepted what the Personnel Officer said, that it would be easier to simply transfer the references—after all the referees were the same. Crass stupidity—of course.

But it was worse than just being stupid. The emotional energy and downright hard work involved in preliminary visits and preparing for the interview—as well as the interview itself—make the 'rejection' literally crushing. If you haven't got the initial paperwork right you can't even get angry at the panel—you just get angry at yourself—and you will be doing too much of that already.

Preliminary visits: you must go. Usually it is not worth going before you are shortlisted. But phone up to find out if you are shortlisted because there may not be much time before the interview.

Some application forms include phrases like "Any attempt to influence the interviewing committee is strictly forbidden". This sounds very alarming because of course you will be trying to influence your potential future consultants. Ordinarily such statements refer only to bribery and such like. If in doubt, discuss it with the relevant person in Regional Medical Staffing or seek help from the College.

When you phone to arrange a visit, the consultant's secretary can usually tell you if her boss is on the interviewing panel. Don't limit yourself to those on the panel, especially in a large rotation.

Contact the local senior registrars. They invariably give good advice on who it is important to see—as well as general comments about the rotation.

Referees. Be realistic. Be brave. At my third interview a consultant I knew gave me some feedback about my style of answering questions and gently advised me to change one of my referees. I don't know what the reference said. However, the unfortunate truth is that a reference which is an honest all-round appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses is unlikely to be good enough. Like your CV, it needs to be selectively biased towards your strengths. If you have only a limited choice of referees, you will have to convince them carefully of the realities which fierce competition imposes and then hope for the best.

Practise your interview technique. There are several articles^{2,3,4} about this, including the previous one on this topic by Dr Tufnell in the *Bulletin* in November 1984. I found the idea of each question operating at both a superficial and deep level very helpful, e.g. What special experience have you had? really includes the question, What is it *extra* that you bring to us? Your answer needs to deal with both levels.

Don't be caught out by questions which are meant to be easy and welcoming but will throw you if you haven't got an

answer, e.g. Tell me about an important paper you have read recently.

You must know your CV in detail and be able to back up everything it says about you. Never apologise for yourself or your failings. When asked at the end if you have any questions, say No. You should have prepared for the post carefully enough not to need to ask anything. Remember that the friendly consultant you met in her office may be very harsh when questioning you in front of her colleagues.

Don't be pathologically honest. We know that you will settle for any good job that's going, but you have to convince the panel that you really want to work for them.

Always ask for feedback after the interview. Force yourself to do this even if you don't feel like it. This is vital information. (Some places will offer feedback).

However, keep a sense of proportion. That interview is over. The next interview may well require a different balance of qualities. I well remember attending two interviews in two days (a mistake in itself). I felt my performance was much the same at both. However, at the first I was told that I came across too strongly—I think they feared I might be dangerously self-opinionated. At the second I was criticised for under-selling myself.

Take stock. After a number of failures, stop and review your plan of campaign. You will be beginning to feel dependent

and worn down if not frankly depressed, so get someone else to help you. Check through everything again. This should include asking to read your references or at least discussing them.

Don't take it personally when you are rejected—especially if an insider or late applicant is selected. By all means analyse your performance. But this is not like the exam. The odds against you are much higher.

A good friend of mine, now an ENT senior registrar, told me how a colleague of his had applied rather hopefully for an SR post in the Midlands. Two rival hospitals there had each put up a strong internal candidate. Neither wanted the other to succeed. They agreed on the third choice, my friend's colleague was duly appointed. Take heart. Stranger things have happened.

REFERENCES

- ¹HEALY, K. (1985) Job hunting in London, 1984. *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 9, 10–11.
- ²*How to Do It*—2nd edition (1985). Articles from the *British Medical Journal*. London: British Medical Association.
- ³TUFNELL, G. (1984) How to get the senior registrar post you want. *Bulletin of the Royal College of Psychiatrists*, 8, 214–216.
- ⁴RHODES, P. (1983) Letters to a young doctor (Applying for jobs. Interviews: sell yourself. Interviews: what happens). *British Medical Journal*, 286, 618–620; 706–707; 784–785.

Merck Sharp & Dohme Prizes for Young Psychopharmacologists

Two prizes of £250 each are to be awarded in 1987 by the British Association for Psychopharmacology, with funds provided by Merck Sharp & Dohme Ltd, for outstanding research in basic psychopharmacology and clinical psychopharmacology respectively. Applications are invited from research workers under the age of 35 active in one or other of these fields. Applications should be submitted to Professor M. H. Lader at the Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, and should comprise:

1. A detailed CV;

2. Three key published papers which have undergone peer review;
3. A 250-word resumé of the applicant's achievements to date and plans for the future.

A condition of the award of the prize is that the successful applicant will write a review paper setting the results of his research against the literature of the topic, for publication in the new journal of the Society, to be called *Journal of Psychopharmacology*.

Applications should be received before the 30 September 1987.

International Research Prize

The Board of Management of the Averroes Foundation, in collaboration with the Andalusian Institute of Mental Health (IASAM) has decided to create a prize, to be awarded annually, to encourage the development of research in the mental health care of children and young people. It will be called the Arturo Sanmartin Prize in memory of the

distinguished Spanish psychiatrist. Completed application forms and details of the research project must be received by the Foundation before 10 September 1987. Further information: Fundacion Averroes, Avda. Del Sur 13, 18071 Granada, Spain.