How to do it

Give a reference

SIR JOHN STALLWORTHY

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Give it willingly, or not at all. You should genuinely desire to help the applicant, the appointing committee, and any future candidates or committees who ask for your help. An applicant may be helped or hindered by earlier references you have given for other people, a fact that appears to be unknown or forgotten too frequently. If they were successful in their applications and subsequent experience justified your assessment of them, your credibility will be good. If a member of the appointment committee knows this, the candidate you now support will benefit. If, however, your assessment was proved wrong your present testimonial may be viewed with suspicion and Dr Swan, who was indeed "the best registrar we have had in this department for 20 years," may (because of your bad judgment last time) be reclassified as Dr Goose by a disillusioned member of the appointment committee—who will not be silent on the reason for his disillusionment. The chance of this happening increases if two or more applicants for the post produce references signed by you, each stating that he or she is outstanding and just the person you would appoint to your own staff if a vacancy existed. If it is reported that you have such a vacancy, or have just filled one, your reputation is in greater jeopardy.

On the other hand, if you agree to support two or more candidates you believe are good and well equipped for the post available, and there is no reason why you should not do this, it is even more necessary to state precisely why you have done so in each testimonial and what your assessment is of their respective merits. This can be of great value in helping the committee to decide.

The way to hinder

*Miss U N Fortunate
Junior Secretary to A N Ass Esq
Deputy Assistant Administrator
Any AHA (Teaching).*

Dear Miss Fortunate,

Dr N O Good*

In reply to your letter of 1 April requesting me to send a reference in support of an application made by Dr Good for the post of consultant psychiatrist in the Any AHA (Teaching) group of hospitals I cannot remember him/her.

It may be that Dr Good is a married woman who worked with me under another name. If so, I was neither invited to her wedding nor kept informed of her subsequent progress. It is unlikely, however, that she would claim to have worked

with me unless this is true and Dr Good would have been fortunate indeed to have this training which would make her/him an ideal candidate for the consultant position you wish to fill.

Yours faithfully,
Betty Smart, secretary
pp Professor A Mentia

* Dr Good was not appointed. Professor Mentia was "blacked" by the candidates union so will probably not be writing further references for the time being.

This model of how *not* to request or write a testimonial gives the reader more information about the writer than the candidate it was expected to help. Neither deserves credit. The candidate omitted the courtesy of asking the professor to act as referee (with the option of refusing), or of sending a curriculum vitae to refresh his memory on relevant details. The self-satisfied referee was honest—or forgetful—in admitting ignorance of the candidate but, in either case, made his testimonial valueless. Failure to sign the reference personally, or to explain that he had lost both hands but not his manners, was not justified by the casual request for help from the AHA (Teaching) signed by a junior secretary.

The way to help

As the referee in this case was a professor, he may have been abroad when the request for a testimonial arrived, but, he would receive many such requests, so his secretary should know how to deal with them. A brief telegram of enthusiastic support from the Argentine or elsewhere, or a telephone message with explanatory secretarial cover, could prove invaluable in helping the candidate because of the evidence it provided of the high regard which prompted such action.

To be effective a testimonial should convey a sense of genuine interest in the person about whom it is written, with an evaluation of those factors which might be expected to promote success in the post available. This effect is *not* achieved by merely recording facts already summarised in the curriculum vitae—a lazy habit to be discouraged. The less stereotyped and the more personal the reference the more effective its impact will be. Presumably that was the reason for writing it. This means being prepared to take the time necessary to give the maximum help to the appointment committee, and hence to the candidate, while at the same time avoiding overstatement. Brevity is commendable.

In summary, a reference should be personal, relevant, accurate, and honest in its appraisal of the candidate's claims for the desired post. It should result in arousing the interest of the appointment committee members and the granting of an interview. Both the candidate and the referee are then on trial, the latter in absentia.

Eventually this series will be collected into a book and hence no reprints will be available from the authors.

University of Oxford, Oxford

JOHN STALLWORTHY, FRCS, FRCOG, emeritus Nuffield professor of obstetrics and gynaecology