Career focus

Get a distinction award

Now is the time to start applying for a distinction award for the year 2000. Sundara Lingam and Romesh Gupta give practical steps for getting a B merit award

There are major changes in the way distinction awards are made to consultants in England and Wales. A more transparent, fair, and open system is in operation. The awards round for the year 2000 is starting now, and consultants are asked to apply. The closing date is 28 January 2000, but any consultant who wishes to apply should begin the paper work now as it takes some time to complete. Consultants also need to get support for their applications from various organisations.

Who can apply?

All consultants working for the NHS—whether employed full time, part time, maximum part time, or honorary contracts—are eligible, except those employed in a locum capacity. The age limit for granting awards is 62, so, for the next round, consultants born on or after 30 September 1937 are eligible. A consultant without any discretionary points can also apply.

Know the process

You will need copies of all the documentation relating to the distinction awards scheme. NHS staff can obtain copies from their employer locally (usually from the medical director). You can also get copies from the home page of the Advisory Committee on Distinction Awards (ACDA) on the Department of Health's website (www.open.gov.uk/doh/nhsexec/acda.htm). Your medical director will have a hard copy of the ACDA guide.

One route to an award is to prepare a curriculum vitae on the form required by the ACDA and give it to the BMA's regional consultant and specialist committee. You should speak with several committee members and discuss your particular merits, contributions, and achievements with them. If you do not know who to contact in your region telephone your local BMA office and get the contact address from the indus-

trial relations officer. You must submit a completed ACDA CV questionnaire, which has a structured form like an application form. The ACDA accepts only those nominations made with this CV questionnaire. You can take a copy of the blank questionnaire from the above website.

Nominate yourself

Self nominations were accepted last year for the first time. You must send everything filled in correctly to the Regional Awards Committee which are listed in the guide documents on the ACDA website.

The regional awards committee will also receive nomina-

tions from other sources (such as the royal colleges, university, local consultants' committees, the Royal Society of Medicine, Overseas Doctors Association, and regional speciality groups). Consultants should contact their respective bodies and seek their support and ask them to produce a citation form. The citation is like a reference, and it is customary for consultants to have a copy for their records. The more support a consultant gets the better are his or her chances.

Support from any source should be sent to the Regional Awards Committee only on a citation form. You could send the questionnaire curriculum

vitae, and two or three blank citation forms to those organisations that might support your nomination.

If the organisation supporting you is not familiar with the process then explain it to them and send them a copy of Criteria for Distinction Awards, which you can get from the ACDA website.

Management support

Your employer—that is, chief executive, must also support you by giving a citation: there is a form for this available on the ACDA website. Speak to your chief executive and medical director and get their support. In some districts, hospitals, and trusts this can be discussed at the senior medical staff committee. Basically, you should get as much local support for you as possible. List all your achievements and contributions on a sheet of paper and give it to your chief executive and medical director. Without local support you have no chance.

Check through the criteria for distinction awards (see box), and make sure that your achievement portfolio matches them across the whole range.

Some personal views

Many consultants might have been nominated unsuccessfully in the past. As long as they still meet the eligibility criteria they can apply again. Unfortunately, we understand that the citations from previous attempts are not considered when a fresh application is made. We hope this will change, as previous citations can be still be useful to the awards committee. For example, one of us was secretary to a professional society, and the then president provided a citation. Now, that doctor is no longer the president and the nominee is no longer the secretary, that valuable support is lost. Similarly, an officer of a royal college or a university professor who gave an earlier citation could have retired

Criteria for distinction awards

1 Professional excellence—For most consultants, this will be founded on the sustained quality of the service they provide to patient care, and recognition of leadership

2 Research, innovation, and improvement in the service—

Expectations will vary for different groups (such as those in teaching or district hospitals, those with honorary or NHS contracts, etc) and will relate to the differing opportunities in these different environments

3 Outstanding administrative or management effort—This includes those who effectively implement innovations, involving activities often of national significance, which will again be related to opportunity and normal expectations. For example, honorary NHS contract holders (eg clinical academic staff, research workers, certain PHLS staff) whose duties include a smaller NHS management content will often not contribute substantially in this area. Consultants working in community and management based specialties such as public health medicine and dental public health are expected, on the other hand, to secure measurable achievement in service development as part of their normal work, so that they have to be assessed on the basis of above average effort or contribution

4 Outstanding contribution to other forms of service development—such as clinical audit, clinical governance, the effective promulgation of evidence based medicine, and external evaluation and audit

5 Teaching and training—for example, special effort to train junior staff, or taking a leading role in undergraduate teaching or postgraduate medical education (including the establishment of short term national or overseas training links), especially if undertaken in addition to ordinary duties. Contribution by consultants to training of other NHS staff, and also to public education and health promotion will also be relevant

6 Outstanding commitment to service—achievement of service goals, innovative service delivery and the sustained delivery of high quality patient care in hard pressed service areas.

when the nominee reapplied for an award. Shouldn't one's track record speak for itself? It would be fair to consider any earlier citations given and then to consider the progress and further contributions the consultant has made. For a fair system, we think all the information from all sources should be valued.

Distinction awards are not continued automatically until retirement however, but are reviewed every five years. Getting the first award is more difficult. It is not easy to apply or get an award, but if your name does not go forward you certainly won't get one.

All nominations must be with the Regional Awards Committee by 28 January 2000, but, because various committees work to different schedules, it is best to put your case to your royal college, BMA's regional consultants and specialist committee, university, specialty committee and so on by Christmas at the latest. Good luck.

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How much is a distinction award worth?

Award type	Number of awards	% of consultant body	Value
A+	277	1	£58,525
A	955	3.6	£43,125
B	1874	8.0	£24,640

Source: ACDA Annual report March 1998

Distinction awards are paid with salary and are pensionable. By retirement, around 25% of consultants will hold an award, but there are many more nominations than awards so the scheme is highly competitive. The total expenditure on B, A, and A+ awards in England and Wales in 1998/9, including the national insurance and pension contributions payable on the awards, was around £100 million. The corresponding total for Scotland was around £13 million.

The basic salary scale range for consultants as at 1 April 1999 is £47,345 - £61,605. The discretionary points scheme extends the consultants' salary scale range by five steps of roughly £2,460 each up to a maximum of £73,925. Distinction awards are paid in addition to consultants' basic salaries and subsume the value of any discretionary points held previously, so it's not possible to hold a distinction award and discretionary points.

Useful address

ACDA Secretariat
NHS Executive
Room 2N35D
Quarry House
Quarry Hill
Leeds LS2 7UE

Tel: 0113 254 5715
<http://www.open.gov.uk/doh/nhsexec/acda.htm>

Briefing

● Junior doctors are currently excluded from the EU working time directive. All are agreed that this is an anomaly that must come to an end—the disagreements are over the timescale, with the UK government holding out for a gentle phase in... over 13 years. Last week the European parliament voted by 455 to three that the reduction should take place over 4 years, with an immediate cap on hours of 54 each week. It is the Council of Ministers that decides however, and the UK government says the NHS needs longer to adjust.

● Glance down the opportunities in *International Health Exchange* to find an ad for a "country director" for Kosovo. Not the whole country it turns out, but a pretty responsible task nevertheless: managing logistics there for the International Medical Corps. As you might expect from an organisation based in Los Angeles, IMC have a rather swish website at <http://www.imc-la.org>; country directors for Albania and Angola are also required.

● A production error resulted in the truncation of Carl Gray's job title and contact details in the paper version, for which apologies. (Gray C. *Eccentricity and conformity*. BMJ 1999;Classified suppl:Nov 13) Send the usual compliments to: Carl Gray, *consultant histopathologist, Harrogate District Hospital, Lancaster Park Road, Harrogate HG2 7SX* carlgray@btinternet.com

● www.docjob.com/ is a large US site with lots and lots of jobs and interestingly plain navigation. Many advertisers seem to feel that the best thing they can offer applicants is "outstanding compensation." It's probably just a cultural misunderstanding, but I thought compensation was money you got after something bad had happened to you.

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