Survival of the fittest?

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"Mr X..." I am not sure whether the secretary of the interviewing committee ever finishes the sentence but for four to six anxiously waiting candidates it means that one of them has been chosen to join that select group of people called "consultant surgeons." My name was called just over an hour ago—at least I think it was for I still feel rather flattened and shocked by the news. I also feel a sense of relief, sympathy, and excitement—relief that the uncertainty of my family's future has been removed, relief that I do not need to apply for further posts, sympathy for the other candidates, and excitement about the prospects of the new job.

Competition for any post is desirable and should produce the best candidate, but is the present system ideal? The average age of surgical consultants on appointment remains at 38, and the average number of interviews attended by each is 11. Perhaps I should feel fortunate that I had to face the trial of an interview only five times, and I hope that my comments on the selection procedure will be helpful.

Finding a vacancy

Most people learn of a forthcoming consultant vacancy from the back pages of the British Medical Journal or Lancet. There are then usually three hectic weeks in which to obtain details of the post, visit the hospitals, and submit an application. This time is barely adequate, particularly as in one case it took repeated telephone calls and over two weeks to receive the details. Time would be saved if all advertisements gave the telephone number of the person providing further details of the post as well as of the person who is arranging visits to the district. In most cases I received details within two to three days of requesting them. The information is fairly standardised and interesting, but from one authority I received a poorly photocopied, single grey sheet that was less than helpful. Perhaps the aim was to discourage applicants. One authority apologised that details of the post were not ready but hoped that I would be interested in the enclosed holiday brochure of the area. Another sent the wrong job description and then had the effrontery to ask me to return it. One job description gave two telephone numbers to ring to arrange a visit to the hospital. The first put me in touch with an irate builder and the second with the sewage works. It took over a dozen long-distance telephone calls to arrange that visit. One job description said that the successful applicant would be encouraged to develop a special interest of his own choosing. It was therefore an expensive, frustrating, and wasteful day to be told on arrival that the successful applicant would be participating in the renal transplant programme and that the senior lecturer who had been doing all the transplants was applying for the post. As expected, he was appointed.

Preparing for the interview

Visiting the hospitals and meeting the consultants usually takes at least one whole day, and is not easy to arrange if you have a busy job. Although one consultant could make himself available for only one afternoon in the two weeks before applications had to be received, most were extremely flexible and generous with their time despite seeing more than 50 prospective candidates in most cases. Considering what is said and written about the National Health Service, most surgeons I met were enthusiastic about their work, but frustrated by the increasing bureaucracy and the appalling conditions under which many had to work.

Application forms are poorly designed, and trying to fit the required information into the inadequate space must be a secretary's nightmare. Surely it would be better to have no official forms but to specify the information required in a series of headings and the size of paper on which the application should be submitted. It is amazing that some authorities still require 12 or even 16 copies to be sent in by candidates—presumably this is another way of discouraging applicants, or perhaps someone in the office is a stamp collector.

Choosing good referees is important. Some will actively canvass for their candidate, and this may improve his or her chances of being short-listed. There are usually only about 10 days between the publishing of the short list and the interviews so it is essential for the candidate to make sure that his sponsors have been notified, are not abroad, and they have sent in their references.

Trial by sherry

Many authorities arrange a meeting of the short-listed candidates before the interview. This "trial by sherry" takes many forms and often is more important than the actual interview as it enables the local medical staff to compare the respective candidates and to make their choice. Although the best candidate should be appointed, it is obviously unwise for the appointments committee to select someone who will not work well with the local medical staff. These trials take various forms, from a thimble of sherry and a stale sandwich to a formal dinner at which each candidate is required to make a speech. The process is reminiscent of a beauty competition. Although wives are sometimes invited, I think it is an unfair additional burden to which they should not be subjected. These meetings enable the candidates to view the opposition (the other candidates) as well as the wide range of local medical and nursing staff. Certainly after one meeting I was convinced that I would not enjoy working in that...
health district and was glad that after the interview I was not faced with the decision of whether to accept the post.

The interview

The interviews are fairly standardised and as the candidates are usually interviewed in alphabetical order I have had the misfortune of always being the penultimate or last one interviewed. Surely drawing lots for the order of interview would be fairer? While the interviews are taking place is a good time for renewing acquaintances, picking up surgical gossip, and studying the opposition. There is usually one person who appears intent on digesting an impressive-looking book—though no page is turned throughout the afternoon—and there is always one who fills the room with tobacco smoke, much to the discomfort of the rest. Conversation tends to be lighthearted but each candidate noticeably quietens as his turn for interview approaches. After it he visibly relaxes but after the final interview the tension returns, conversation becomes more difficult, and the consumption of cigarettes increases.

In my limited experience the members of the interviewing panel have always been most courteous and the chairmen have gone out of their way to settle the candidate. Interviews tend to average 20 to 30 minutes each, though in one place no candidate had longer than 10 minutes. It is remarkable that a job for the rest of one’s working life can be settled on such a short acquaintance, particularly as in this place there had been no previous trial by sherry. In my first interview the professor of surgery on the panel had to be awakened to question me. Perhaps his embarrassment prevented him from looking at me throughout his questioning. The questions are fairly standard—though one friend was asked whether he was a homosexual, to which he replied that he had not realised that it was de rigueur for the appointment.

Courtesy to candidates

Several authorities do not acknowledge the receipt of application forms, and some fail to inform candidates that they have not been short-listed for interview. A little courtesy here would relieve the suspense and save many telephone calls requesting this information. Similarly, some authorities could be much quicker in reimbursing expenses incurred in attending interviews.

Any selection procedure is open to abuse and criticism and appointing consultant medical staff is no exception. It is somewhat reminiscent of an assault course and the more practice you have at it the better you become. I hope that my comments may be useful to the organisers of future appointments and to the candidates about to embark on the course. Regrettably, there are many who have had much more experience of this game than I and to them maybe I quote Rex Lawrie’s advice, which he regards as infallible, “that the job they are eventually destined to get will be better than all those they did not.”

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Person-rem’s and the future

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Washington, DC—Contemplation of the biological consequences of low-level ionising radiation has become so frequently written up that, in the United States anyway, average citizens are being asked to consider their futures in terms of “person-rem’s.” While such a unit of extrapolation may be handy for biostatisticians, it saps the accompanying number of relevance to the individual. Some opponents of nuclear power even suggest the latter is the purpose of person-rem’s and other univivd ways of expressing risks and damage.

Two new reports along these lines have been released to the public. Each is a portion of a larger report to be issued later. Both bear directly on the kinds of events associated with the accident on 28 March at the Three Mile Island nuclear-powered electrical generating station near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Both were assembled and issued under the auspices of the US National Academy of Sciences.

Reports on risks

One, subtitled “A Critical Review of the Literature,” is Risks Associated with Nuclear Power. It was undertaken as a contribution to a huge and as yet unfinished study on nuclear and alternative energy systems. The other is the report of the committee on the Biological Effects of Ionising Radiation, known as the “BEIR report,” and first issued in 1972. This 1979 version holds to much of the “linear hypothesis” advanced in 1972 to deny a threshold below which radiation doesn’t damage life. But the new report has also managed to alienate several of its authors among the committee members because of one aspect or another of that hypothesis.

Neither report, at least in the summaries issued thus far, has material on the Three Mile Island mishap. The Risks report contains one footnote, added in proof, specifically mentioning that it was written before the accident. That footnote follows a paragraph beginning: “As regards risks of reactor accidents, the optimists cite some 200-300 reactor years of operation of