

The times

Choosing a colleague

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Appointment committees should be of intense interest to those charged with appointing future colleagues. Senior registrars will become consultants despite their worst efforts and this will soon be true of registrar appointments. Why is it then that some colleagues seem indifferent to the process of appointment committees or seem to regard them as a lark at which fun can be had at the expense of fellow committee members or even of the poor candidates?

When the request comes for nominations for the committee, colleagues shuffle their papers or look intently at their feet until someone suggests an absent colleague or the one most recently appointed. Sometimes a colleague hears the shortlist for his potential team mate and decides that he “can’t have that” – so asks to replace one of the nominated members, often without informing the committee chairman. Despite the preparation of an acceptable job description, there has rarely been any attempt to arrive at a clear understanding of the type of person who is being sought for the job. What sort of characteristics will be required to fit the needs of the district or the particular team?

The appointment of a district pharmacist or a comparatively junior administrator at a salary equivalent to the tax paid by a consultant is taken much more seriously. A ‘person specification’ is carefully prepared, advertising is ‘targeted’ and a careful selection process, often involving presentations or other appropriate tasks, is embarked upon. We may be sceptical about psychological profiling and the rest but at least a serious effort is made to find the right person for the job which makes our appointment advisory committees look woefully inadequate.

References are sought but rarely, if ever, reviewed before the meeting. A reference to unusual drinking habits may then result in rejection of a candidate when the referee is referring to a predilection for Robinson’s barley water. Worse still is the glowing reference which appears to bear no relation to the candidate before you.

A self-regulating profession should be able to give credence to references from a colleague. Sadly, we have reached a point when many references, even

those from distinguished colleagues, seem intended to deceive rather than inform. No-one should agree to act as a referee unless he/she has personal knowledge of and interest in the candidate and has considered his or her suitability for the post being applied for. It should provide an honest appraisal of the candidate’s abilities and training, an assessment of his/her capacity for relating to patients and colleagues and his/her strengths and weaknesses in relation to the particular post.

Problems arise when you like the applicant as a person but regard him/her as unsuited to the particular post. This is more acute when the candidate’s self-assessment is clearly at variance with your own view. When a candidate wishes to apply for a post for which he/she is not qualified according to College guidelines, surely it is better to refuse to give a reference or at least point out that you will be obliged to indicate this in your reference. Whenever possible the content of the reference should be discussed with the candidate, who then has the option of seeking another reference elsewhere. If an adverse reference is indicated this should be made clear to the candidate.

Beware, however, of the risks. On the only occasion on which I refused to act as referee but was cited none the less, my reference read, “This candidate is totally unfitted to engage in clinical practice”. The individual was appointed to the post of senior registrar despite, or perhaps because of this. Or did the committee simply fail to consider the references?

The shortlisting is a critical stage of the process and it is here that discrimination or lack of it is most dangerous. The name or place of birth or qualification should not be the sole basis for rejection. If a British graduate with a foreign name or birthplace is rejected, the application should be scrutinised again. The possession of the appropriate qualification and training are normally a requirement for selection, but even here exceptional candidates can be considered. Published research is a plus point but do not forget that many psychiatric projects require a long term investment and the absence of premature publication might be fully justified. Look too at the candidate’s

interests and career beyond the rotational scheme tramlines – you may have to work with your new colleague for many years so at least try to find one who is interesting. Whatever you do, do not agree to cede your right to participate in the shortlisting process.

The interview may well be given disproportionate weight in appointments but this is a fact of life so that how the candidate performs on the day determines the decision. If you have any reservations about the way in which the committee has been set up, about the shortlisting or any other procedural matter, then raise these with the chairman before the interviews start.

Every effort should be made to provide the candidates with the best opportunity to present themselves. Since this is a very serious event in their lives, the least that the panel can do is treat it with the same solemnity. It is good to laugh with candidates but not at them. Candidates are expected to dress appropriately and so should the committee. A consultant may feel that a sweater and jeans best express his style of practice but this is an occasion when we should be concerned with statements from the candidates.

The interview is not an opportunity for a viva voce examination, either to demonstrate the candidate's ignorance or one's own brilliance.

In the past, I have often found the personal questions, asked usually by the chairman or lay members, among the most revealing and helpful in reaching a decision. Present realistic concern about discrimination now places such questions out of court. We should, however, be grateful for the latitude still permitted and exercise great discretion. Unless we regulate ourselves we will soon find restrictions such as those imposed upon some social service department appointments where all questions must be cleared in advance and all candidates asked the same questions.

The College representative is provided with guidelines and expected to report back to the College. His/her main concern is that the candidates should meet

the requirements in training and experience which have been laid down. If candidates fail to meet these requirements then our representative can question their shortlisting and if they are recommended by the committee can request the chairman either to delay the recommendation or submit it to the employing authority, without informing the candidates. The College representative will then submit a minority report to the chairman of the employing authority and to the College. Apart from these responsibilities, the College representative is a full member of the committee with voting rights.

It is, of course, open to any member of the committee to make representations to the chairman of the committee and to the authority if they feel that anything irregular has taken place. Should they do so they would be well advised to inform the President or Dean of their action. Otherwise the deliberations of the committee must be treated as absolutely confidential, no matter how tempted one is to report the extraordinary or unexpected comments made by a colleague. It is well worth maintaining some personal note of the proceedings which could be kept for six months. These may be required if any objection to the appointment is made or if any candidate claims that promises were made during the interview.

At the conclusion of the interview it is important to ascertain that the favoured candidate intends to accept the post. Only then can the other candidates be informed of the recommendation. It is both a courtesy and a kindness to ensure that all candidates have an opportunity to discuss their performance with a medical member of the board.

No-one can lay down what questions should be asked but those posed should have a purpose. It is not necessary for each member of the board to ask a specific quota of questions or even to ask any questions at all. If you feel that candidates have had an adequate opportunity to present themselves then ask no more. At the end of the proceedings you could thank the chairman. She might be grateful but surprised.