THE HOT SEAT

A primer for residency interviews
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The origin of the word "interview," the French entrevue, means "to see one another." Residency interviews are based on a common need. The interviewer is "seeing" if the candidate is a good fit for the program, and the candidate is finding out if the job—the location, facilities and residency program itself—is what she wants or needs.

The season to don the dark suit and start traveling is upon us. In 30-some years of conducting interviews, I have witnessed the gamut of human behaviors ranging from autonomic storms—causing hiccups and sweating—to awkward seating positions and lack of eye contact. Through those experiences, I have developed some thoughts and biases that I wish to share with you, and I hope that my suggestions will help you as you set off on the fourth-year’s traditional winter interview tour.

- You are worthy. You must always view yourself as a desirable and competitive candidate. The fact that you were granted an interview is proof enough of this fact. You should think of yourself in positive terms and not fear rejection.
- Keep it short. You have a story to tell. The story is you, who you are, why you want what you want and how you got to this point. The story is not some epiphany or discourse on your family history. For example, you may refer to witnessing a death during your pediatric clerkship or to the hardships of your parents only insofar as these were formative life experiences. My many years of interviewing medical students, however, have taught me that these events are seldom unusual enough to warrant waxing poetic or extensive descriptive narration.
- Be sincere. Let your interviewer know who you are. Avoid trying to be who you are not or trying to conform to someone else’s ideal. This story is about how you have developed into the Individual that you are today.
- Articulate. Use a subject, a verb and an object in every sentence. Do not meander in your response or wander away from the subject of the question.
- Avoid verbal crutches. Do not use fillers or “helpers,” empty phrases such as “you know,” “got you,” or “OK” at the end of each sentence. Or inject meaningless words in the middle like—well, “like.” These can become verbal tics.
- Avoid repetition. Try to avoid sounding manufactured. It gets more difficult as the procession of interviews takes place, but try even as you are asked the same questions over and over again. By being yourself and reacting to each interviewer’s style, you may find it easier to keep things fresh.
- Be assertive. Tentativeness is not a good presenting feature, but doubt is allowed. Do not be afraid to state what you do not know. For instance, it is better to say: “I do not know” or “I am not sure” than to hem and haw. Or for that matter, to go into lengthy discourse as to why you do or do not know something or do not want something. Sound assertive even in your ignorance.
- Know thyself. You will be asked about your strengths and weaknesses. Speak with equal confidence about both. Be honest and concise. Your interviewer will be interested in how well you know yourself and how well you plan to make up for shortcomings. Do not resort to cliché answers that sound manufactured or self-serving. Nobody is looking for perfection. You can refer to a weakness and make it a
positive statement, such as "I look forward to gaining more clinical and organizational experience in order to handle stress better when things get too busy."

- Find your fit. Part of the interview is aimed at finding out if you and the institution are a good fit. Career coaches advise their clients to find out what programs "want" so the client can address that need. If you have enough information, and you think you are what they want, by all means speak about the strengths that you have that match those of the program. But—and this is an absolute—do not fake it! You risk winding up in a program that you did not want, or your interviewer may think that you are insincere—and downgrade you.

- Be informed. Do your homework! Nothing impresses an interviewer more than a candidate who has taken the time to research the program and has concrete questions. Quote something you read that intrigued you, or ask a question about a specific aspect of the program that you learned from available information or third parties. Also, it's a good idea to refresh your memory the night before your interview by rereading about the program online or in materials you've been given in advance. Again: Be sincere. Do not feln interest.

- Conquer the anxiety! If anxiety causes your autonomic system to go on overdrive, here are a few tips: Carry tissues or a handkerchief, and dry your sweaty palms before shaking hands. Go to the bathroom right before interview time so that your mind is on the interview and not on your tortured bladder. Do not drink caffeine-laden beverages if they give you gastroesophageal reflux. Sneak a mint into your mouth if you fear getting bad breath (not the sugar-free kind: Those contain sorbitol, which can cause abdominal upset and undesired sound effects). Take a deep "cleansing" breath through your nose before you sit down for the interview to collect yourself.

- Do not be intimidated! If you feel intimidated by the interviewer, or you do not understand where the interview is headed, do not hesitate to ask for redirection. For example: "Can you please restate your question?" or "I am not sure that I understood correctly." Some people advise that if you are really intimidated or nervous, you think of your interviewer in a ridiculous stance, like in the bathroom. But, as an interviewer, I would rather that you imagine yourself in front of someone you trust or like, and act accordingly. Remember, in the end, residency interviews are mercifully short!

- There is more to life than your job. Remember that life is more than residency. Balance is most important. To get the right residency spot is important, but it is part of a whole called life. You may end up matching in a place that was not within your preferred choices. Never mind. Take the challenge and remember: "More important than where you go is what you do when you get there."

Personal aspects of your life need to be factored into your choices. Happy people make happy residents, and happy residents are a blessing.

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