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Interviews: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

Interviews are a frequent experience for doctors in training who have no choice but to keep changing jobs. Some people sail through them undaunted, whereas others find them intimidating and never get used to them.

Preliminary stages

As part of your preparation for the interview, think of some examples of your work which meet each aspect of the person specification. Be able to speak about them coherently if necessary. Follow the pre-sent instructions carefully. If you are asked to attend ahead of the scheduled time to show documents, then make sure you do. Check directions, parking arrangements and/or public transport.

For interviews, the general expectation and advice in most professional sectors is to dress smartly, as you would for the job. Junior doctors are not allowed to wear suits in clinical areas because of infection control rules. Despite this, you should still wear a suit for an interview. Your interviewers may look relatively casual, but do not interpret this as discourtesy. They may be trying to do their day jobs as well as interviewing you.

During and after the interview

The adrenaline flow can help you and some nervousness is allowed, but do not let it overwhelm you to the point where you have difficulty breathing and speaking. On the other hand, do not act too laid-back, as this will create a bad impression. Sit up straight, but comfortably, and look your questioner in the eye as you answer. Sometimes, your voice can go psychosomatically hoarse, and a drink such as water should be provided for you. It might sound strange, but try to enjoy the interview.

Be polite, clear, articulate, honest and confident. Pause before answering a ques-

tion, to give yourself time to marshal your thoughts and so as not to appear rushed. The question may contain more than one part, which is not really good practice, but still goes on. It is acceptable to reflect the question back to the panel and then state how you are going to structure your answer. It is reasonable to go back and summarize what you have just said and then to carry on answering if you have still got more to say.

If you are having a mental blank or do not understand the question, do not be afraid to ask for it to be repeated or for clarification. Do not cut your answers unnecessarily short, but do not waffle. Be guided by the panel's body language.

Your tone of voice and body language should not be at odds with what you are saying. For instance, if you are trying to convey enthusiasm, do not slouch back and talk indolently.

You may be asked about yourself, clinical situations, research, audit, ethics and general NHS issues, such as clinical governance. Being asked about your weaknesses can be awkward, as you feel you are setting yourself up to fail. Perhaps you could choose a weakness that is not too deleterious, such as paying too much attention to detail. If you say how you are attempting to overcome the weakness, that can offer some mitigation.

Answer each question properly, but be politician-like as well. Use the question to say what you want, within reason. Think of your three unique selling points. It could be something that makes you stand apart from other candidates or achievements you are proud of. Work those unique selling points into comprehensive answers.

Give factual and truthful answers, with substance and figures (if appropriate) and without waffling. Give real examples of where you have done things, when needed. If you are unable to think of a situation where this has happened in real life, then state how you would handle it. If you do not answer the question fully, the interviewer should draw you out, but do not

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rely on that. If invited to expand on your answer, this suggests that you can contribute more. So you should, without repeating what you have just said. If a panel member asks if you have anything to add, then it is wise to take them up on that and not just say no. Some interviewers are poorly trained, if at all, while some actually want to catch you out rather than help you to give your best. This is bad form, but may happen.

It is acceptable to write down the questions or points during the interview to help yourself think. You can take a notebook in with you or write on some paper inside your portfolio, assuming that your portfolio has not been taken away to be examined by someone else while you are being interviewed.

Sometimes, you may not interview well, but the interviewers may have a gut feeling about you and give you a chance. However, you cannot rely on this.

It may feel strange if you know your interviewers. However, when answering questions, you have to act as if you have no prior acquaintance with them. If you do not give an example of something during the interview, the interviewer cannot go by his/her knowledge of you actually having done it in the workplace, as that would not

be fair on other candidates. This will make the interviewer **frustrated, knowing that you could have expressed yourself more effectively. The interviewer can prompt you, but no more than other interviewees, and he/she may feel compelled to err on the side of not doing so.**

For training grade interviews, the panel may not ask you at the end if you have got any questions yourself. If you get a chance, ask them if you have answered all questions fully and done yourself justice. Some interviewers may view this as unconventional and will simply say that they are happy to give you feedback afterwards – in other words, there is no second chance now.

Make sure you thank your interviewers at the end, even if you feel that they have given you a grilling.

It is in your interests to obtain feedback afterwards if you are unsuccessful. This is

appropriate and expected. Some learning points may be generic and useful in subsequent interviews. Others may be specific and not come up again, but will still be useful to know.

Conclusions

Interviews are not to be feared. Be clear, confident, articulate your answers well and do yourself justice. Answer fully, even if you know your interviewers. Be polite and thank the interviewers. Make sure you obtain any feedback afterwards. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine. Her views are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer or any other organization that she is associated with.

Useful website

www.medicalcareers.nhs.uk/postgraduate_doctors/information_for_pg_doctors/interviews_specialty_selecti.aspx

KEY POINTS

- Some nervousness is expected, but do not let it overpower you.
- Answer the questions fully, but do not waffle.
- Be confident and articulate, with good eye contact.
- Thank your interviewers at the end.
- Get feedback if unsuccessful.