

IN BRIEF

- Provides clear guidance of the format that a CV should take
- Highlights opinions of training programme directors on content and presentation of CVs
- Could provide medical personnel directors with guidance on constructing structured application forms.

So you want to be a specialist registrar? – What to put in your CV

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Dentists applying to a specialist training programme often receive conflicting advice over what to put in their curriculum vitae (CV). We conducted a survey of the Training Programme Directors of the dental specialties to determine what aspects of CV content and presentation styles are considered important. This has allowed us to construct guidelines for what to put in a CV. Recently, structured application forms have become increasingly popular and may be a more objective way to carry out the shortlisting process. The guidelines presented could also be used as a framework for medical personnel departments if structured application forms eventually replace the CV.

When considering specialisation it can be difficult to obtain good advice over what information should appear in a curriculum vitae (CV) and how it should be presented. As a consequence of this we decided to conduct a survey of Training Programme Directors (TPDs), the people with the responsibility for appointing specialist registrars, on what they considered important to appear in an applicant's CV. A CV should summarise career history and experience and is the first exposure that TPDs, a shortlisting committee and individuals on an interview panel have to the applicant. As such, it is important that it informs those responsible for appointing specialist registrars (SpRs), that applicants have the necessary qualifications and qualities appropriate for the job ie gets them an interview. The TPD and short-listing panel will be faced with a

large number of applications so it is important to create a good impression with a CV that is well laid out and allows them to readily extract the relevant information.

The career section of the local bookshop will reveal a number of texts on how to write a good CV and may feature ready-made CV formats.¹ Some areas of content and layout are common for all professions; however the CV of a dentist will differ considerably from someone working in industry. We hope that by canvassing the opinion of TPDs we can provide tailor-made advice for dentists applying for specialist registrar posts on what should appear in their CV and how to present it.

THE STUDY

We designed a questionnaire, which was modified after a pilot study, and sent it to 79 Specialist Registrar TPDs in the United Kingdom. The questionnaire contained sections covering different areas of CV content or presentation; for example personal details, undergraduate career, job history etc. It also included an 'other comments' section for overall opinions on any aspect of CV content or presentation. A total of 71 of the 79 questionnaires were returned covering the specialties of oral and maxillofacial surgery, orthodontics,

restorative dentistry, paediatric dentistry, dental public health and oral medicine/pathology.

The questions were designed to establish whether the TPDs strongly recommended inclusion of an item ie it was 'essential' or whether it may simply be 'desirable' to include an item. We also asked if an item should definitely not be included. When we looked at the results of the questionnaire we found that there were some areas where there was almost universal agreement between the TPDs whilst there were other areas where opinion differed widely. This suggests that many aspects of CV presentation and content are a matter of individual preference. However, by taking majority responses we hope that we have created a recommended format that will appeal to most programme directors most of the time [Tables 1–4].

GENERAL LAYOUT OF CV

Most (58%) TPDs preferred a CV that was five to six pages in length. Most (76%) thought the CV should have a separate title page and include a summary statement (63%) at the start. However, applicants are advised not to include a photograph, as 80% of TPDs did not wish to see one. We recommend the use of headings, bullet points and summary tables wherever possible as these can reduce unnecessary wordage.

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Table 1. Guidelines for presentation of CV - General layout.

1. Aim to make your CV five to six pages
2. Include a separate title page
3. Include a summary statement at the start outlining your present position and immediate and long term aims
4. Make use of bullet points and bold to improve presentation
5. Use one and half spacing of text
6. Choose either chronological or reverse chronological order for job history
7. Consider using a table to summarise your job history
8. Check carefully for spelling and grammatical errors

PERSONAL DETAILS

Sixty-nine percent of TPDs felt that it was essential for applicants to state their date of birth, but there was a split verdict on whether age should be directly stated. The majority (61%) would like to know an e-mail address (61%) and to know whether applicants have a driving licence (47%). However, details of marital status (52%), children (63%) and whether an applicant is a smoker or non-smoker (75%) were generally considered not relevant. There was also a split response over whether the CV should include nationality, but if candidates are not from the UK most TPDs considered it essential (76%) to include the time remaining on the visitors permit (immigration status).

SCHOOL CAREER

Details of school academic grades are not considered to be relevant at this stage (42%). The only detail considered desirable by the majority (54%) of TPDs was whether a position of responsibility had been held eg head boy/girl.

UNDERGRADUATE CAREER

Details of candidates' undergraduate training, including the university they attended, the qualifications they gained,

the year of qualification and prizes they won, were considered by most TPDs as essential to include. It is also desirable for applicants to include any travel experience (65%) they may have and a summary of any elective projects (69%).

POSTGRADUATE CAREER

All postgraduate qualifications (96%) together with the institution from which they were gained (85%) and the appropriate dates (89%) should be included. Most TPDs would also like to know if candidates have attended a research methods course (63%), any specialty specific training courses (61%) or have undertaken any postgraduate travel (55%).

SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS

Applicants should include their General Dental Council registration number (85%) and that they are a member of a medical defence organization (70%). In addition, most TPDs would like to know whether applicants are a member of the British Dental Association (62%) and any specialist societies (62%). Most thought it was not necessary to include Family Health Service Authority and vocational training numbers.

PUBLICATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, RESEARCH AND AUDIT

Publications (79%), articles in press (70%) and scripts submitted (56%) should all be included, and most TPDs would also like to of know any work in progress, abstracts published and acknowledgements received. Also a list of the titles of any presentations given (59%) should be provided together with dates (48%) and meetings where the presentation was given (52%). Most TPDs also thought it was desirable to list any unpublished research (57%), research in progress (56%) and studies that applicants have supervised (52%). Clinical audit is also important and this should be included along with a list of any audits that have been completed (69%) and any audits underway (49%).

Table 2. Guidelines for content of CV - Essential items.

1. Date of birth
2. Time left on visitors permit (if from overseas)
3. Undergraduate career: university, qualification, year of qualification and prizes/awards
4. Postgraduate career: qualification(s), institute(s), date(s)
5. Publications: papers published, papers in press, papers submitted
6. Presentations given: name and dates of meeting(s)
7. Research including unpublished material
8. Audit projects completed
9. Management courses attended
10. Committee experience: past and present positions
11. A complete job history with any gaps in employment documented and explained
12. A brief outline of leisure activities
13. A statement of ambitions
14. Referees

MANAGEMENT AND COMMITTEES

The majority of TPDs would like to know whether applicants have attended any management courses (56%), and a list of any positions that they have held on committees both present (66%) and past was thought desirable (63%).

JOB HISTORY

There is a split in opinion over how employment history should be presented. Forty percent of TPDs prefer the job history to be presented in chronological order whilst 44% prefer reverse chronological order. However, nearly all TPDs wished gaps in employment to be both documented (87%) and explained (83%). The majority (66%) thought it better to separate hospital, community and general practice experience, and many (52%) liked to see a tabulated career summary. When describing each job, it should be limited to one or two lines for earlier jobs increasing to five or six lines on the present job. When describing their present post candidates should ideally include the consultants worked for, treatments carried out, clinics attended, experience gained and a logbook summary, although fitting

all this information into five or six lines could be difficult. Providing short summaries/brief descriptions and tabulated summaries may make this easier and concurs with previous recommendations.²

SOCIAL DETAILS, STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, AMBITIONS

A brief description (three or four lines) of leisure activities and social interests was considered adequate for this section of the CV. Most TPDs did not wish to see a separate section listing strengths and weaknesses (70%), but the majority did think it appropriate to include a statement on ambitions (63%).

REFEREES

Most directors (76%) felt that referees should be included.

PRESENTATION OF CV

TPDs were in strong agreement (96%) that the overall presentation of the CV was important. The majority thought it was a good idea to use bullet points (54%), one and a half spacing (52%) and bold text (61%) where appropriate.

When printing CVs it is considered worthwhile using good quality paper and a laser printer. Some programme directors have suggested the use of a clear plastic presentation folder to protect, improve the presentation and make the CV stand out from 'the others'. However, since many CVs are photocopied before being distributed to the shortlisting committee this effort can be futile. One TPD suggested incorporating a header or footer with name and page numbers to avoid errors during duplication. A paper clip or treasury tag (with punched holes in the top left corner) could be used to hold the pages together to make photocopying easier and prevent damage to the document by the 'rough' removal of staples. Whilst not included in the questionnaire, the use of colour text is also not recommended as the desired effect will be lost during the photocopying process. Leaving an adequate margin for the comments and points to be written down by the committee members has also been recommended.³

Table 3. Guidelines for content of CV – Desirable items.

1. Personal details: age, e-mail address and possession of a driving license
2. Positions of responsibility at school
3. Undergraduate experience: travel and a summary of student elective
4. Postgraduate experience: courses attended e.g. research methods course or courses specific to the specialty applied for and postgraduate travel
5. Society membership: BDA and specialist societies
6. Additional details on publications, research and audit including: work in progress, acknowledgements received, abstracts published and supervision of projects by junior staff/students

OTHER USEFUL TIPS

A number of areas were highlighted when the questionnaire was opened up for 'other comments'. The first is that CVs should be typed with correct spelling and grammar. Mistakes in spelling and grammar are off-putting and do not impart a good impression. Since most word-processing packages have American settings as default and do not include dental terms, we recommend that applicants do not solely rely on a computer spelling or grammar package but ask colleagues or friends to proof-read the CV for such mistakes. The second point highlighted is that CVs should be short, concise, relevant and have honest details. Be selective in what is included and make the CV as concise as possible. It is worth revising the CV a number of times before settling on the definitive version. During each revision, it is usually possible to reduce the length leaving only important and relevant information. Although there is no room for modesty, a CV must be an honest reflection of past experience. Remember that interviewers may ask for expansion on certain aspects of the CV at interview so applicants must make sure they have the confidence to talk about anything that is included. The third area highlighted is that CVs should have a clear, accessible layout and be easy to

read. Following these guidelines should ensure the inclusion of all the right information, but do seek others' opinions on whether the CV also looks good and reads well.

An important comment is that the CV should be tailored to the particular job applied for. Remember one CV does not fit all. Start with the job advert and read it carefully to fully appreciate the vacancy. A 'person specification' should now accompany each SpR post job description. This document is invaluable as it lets applicants know exactly what qualifications, training, practical and personal skills the interview panel are looking for. Applicants should go through this list and make sure each item is not just covered in their CV but that it is obvious to the people doing the shortlisting. This may require revision of certain sections of the CV to highlight particular skills or experience that may be pertinent to that post.

Another recommendation by the TPDs is to highlight details to make the CV stand out from those of the other candidates. Include prizes or awards achieved, accomplishments, and anything that has been particularly interesting or worthwhile. Intense competition for posts can make these 'extras' crucial factors in differentiating one applicant from another. As well as listing such items, candidates should explain why they did them and what was gained from them. Highlight the positive aspects of each job held and try to show how the accumulation of experience and knowledge from previous posts has provided the necessary skills to gain an SpR position.

Table 4. Guidelines for content of CV – Items to exclude.

1. A photograph
2. Personal details: smoker/nonsmoker, marital status and dependant children
3. Details of school career
4. VT and FHSA numbers
5. A list of strengths and weaknesses

DEPARTMENTAL VISITS

There is a split in opinion over which point in the application process for an SpR position an applicant should visit the department. Whilst the majority (56%) of TPDs considered that a visit was desirable before shortlisting, many commented that departmental visits might be more appropriate after the shortlisting process has taken place. We would, therefore, recommend contacting the department and obtaining their preference, although ideally this should be stated in the advertisement or job description. A TPD from Northern Ireland was keen to point out that in his region, fair employment legislation has led to discouragement of departmental visits or contact with any of the interview panel prior to interview, to avoid the potential 'informal interview'. For this reason, contact names of consultants or other programme directors are not placed in the advertisements for SpR posts in Northern Ireland. With tightening of legislation in the rest of the UK, mainly in line with European directives, this practice may become common to all hospital appointments.

THE FUTURE

There seems to be a growing opinion in medicine and dentistry that the CV may become obsolete as a shortlisting tool. Appointment committees in the medical specialties are increasingly being encouraged to use a points system to help in the shortlisting process, which is based around a structured application form rather than a CV. A manual of a points system for doctors who sit on interview committees has been published.⁴ The points system has scores for different items eg papers published, presentations, audit, teaching experience, prizes and job experience. These items are weighted according to their significance to the post. For example a presentation at a local meeting may gain the candidate five points (with a maximum of 15 points awardable for the section) whilst a paper in a peer reviewed journal will gain the candidate 15 points (with a maximum of 45 points for the section). This may make shortlisting a more objective process rather than relying on a subjective opin-

ion gained from a CV. However, the final appointment to a post is still dependent on an interview so that interpersonal skills can be assessed.

Finally, the results could be used as a framework by personnel departments to formulate a structured application form for dental SpR posts.

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