

HOW TO . . .

Prepare For An SpR Interview

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Introduction

Most specialities in the services hold pre-selection interviews so that candidates are not entered for a Specialist Registrar (SpR) interview until they have reached a standard at which they can expect to be selected. It is also worth remembering that military candidates are not in direct competition for national Training Numbers (NTNs) with the other candidates on the board. They are being assessed to ensure that they are 'of a standard', in other words, if they were applying for a number on the open market, that they would be competitive.

One important message to remember is that preparation for the interview begins many weeks before the interview day. It is not simply a question of pitching up on the day and hoping to give a good show. It is probably the most important interview since you entered medical school! It should be treated as such.

Administration and Paperwork

Simply do as you are asked promptly and efficiently. Complete the application form with care and clarity. Answer all questions with appropriate responses and check repeatedly to eliminate typographic errors; use a word processor to complete the form if possible. If the Board request 18 copies of your CV and 12 signed photographs then do as they ask and keep your complaints about the Amazonian rain forest and excess postage to yourself. If there are any bits of the administrative instructions that you do not understand, no matter how trivial or patently ludicrous they seem, telephone the secretary to the interview board and clarify any such points in advance. It is safer to know than to wonder – even if the price is for you to sound ignorant on the end of a telephone.

Curriculum Vitae

This should be up to date and relevant to the particular post you are applying for. Ensure that your publications and presentations section is current – include, under separate headings, things that have been submitted, are in preparation or awaiting publication as well as actually published papers. Remove irrelevancies from previous versions. For example, 'I would love to work in the Highlands of Scotland' will not impress when interviewed in South West Thames. It

pays to check that your referees remember that they have agreed to offer references on your behalf. Check that they have a suitable positive reference ready for dispatch so as not to delay proceedings. If you have been foolish enough to name referees without their prior consent then ask them immediately. Include membership of any professional organisations such as the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland.

It is unlikely that as an SHO you will have many publications, but make sure that you can remember what each one was about and ensure that you re-read them. There is nothing worse than including a paper entitled 'The Behaviour of Cytokines in Acute Pancreatitis' on which you were third author and did little more than collect the blood samples and subsequently be questioned by a consultant surgeon with a special interest in cytokines in pancreatitis!

You must be able to describe all your research and publications as well as quote supporting literature and justify any conclusions you have made. It is unlikely that the interview panel will have come across your article in the Outer Mongolian Journal of Ephemera, but it is not unheard of for more particular board members to make a special effort to seek out such articles!

The Medical Press

Whilst you may not ordinarily bother with the medical press now is the time to read assiduously. General publications such as the British Medical Journal (and the News Review) should be read for at least 6 weeks prior to interview. Hospital Doctor normally holds a contrary view to the BMJ News Review and is also worth reading. Peruse the standard journals of your speciality. Read a broadsheet newspaper and take note of the medical stories that appear – whilst they may not appear to impinge on your particular speciality, an awareness of public perceptions and attitudes to the profession as a whole is often sought by your interviewers.

Interview Topics

As the week of your interview draws close, it is worth ensuring that you have thoughts and responses for a whole range of predictable questions. These might range from current therapeutic controversies in your particular field through to the Secretary of State for

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Health's recent House of Commons statement about the future of the NHS. Outlined below are *some* of the most common topics that recur at interview with predictable monotony. It is emphasised that these are some suggestions and the list of topics is by no means exclusive. Sit and think about which topics are 'hot' in your speciality and perhaps ask a friendly consultant or senior SpR their views on likely discussion areas.

In general the aim is to have a reasoned chain of thought in response to these subjects. It is not suggested that a whole range of verbatim answers are memorised, rather that a sensible response can be summoned promptly whilst the rest of your previously assimilated thoughts are extracted from the darker recesses of your mind. One caveat however is that certain subjects, such as clinical governance (*vide infra*), require a definition that should be recounted parrot fashion, but not at the expense of understanding!

Clinical Governance / NICE / CHI / NHS Reform

These are all interlinked. The candidate will be expected to know the make-up and function of each organisation and how one group interacts with the others. All these groups can be included under the general heading of NHS Reform and it will be useful to consider your views on this broad and contentious area in advance of interview. Most hospitals will have a policy on clinical governance and this will give useful pointers and definitions. Access the internet websites of these organisations for clear explanations of their functions. Think through some clinical scenarios and decide how clinical governance shapes your responses and actions – help from a senior colleague is again beneficial.

Reduction in Juniors' Hours and Training

This is particularly hot topic at the moment in virtually every speciality and you will be expected to explain in some detail what potential problems you envisage given the continuing reduction in hours. You may well be asked if you have any potential solutions to the problem – extension of training, fellowship years, introduction of shift systems and even the re-introduction of the Senior Registrar (Junior Consultant) grade are ideas for discussion. This is not a forum to complain about pay!

The Consultant Contract

Whilst you may think that you are simply applying for an SpR position, you will, with the agreement of the interview panel before you, be about to commence on an inexorable journey towards consultant status. As such,

your views on the consultant contract will be directly relevant and you should have some sensible views to offer. A knee jerk response of 'its all bloody terrible and what about my private practice' is not what is required. Remember for this and all other subjects, whenever you reject an idea or proposal you are inviting the response of 'So what would you do?' Be prepared.

The Differences Between Clinical Governance, Audit and Research

These are seemingly unrelated areas that often confuse the unwary who have not troubled themselves to clarify in advance what each entails. Remembering an appropriate definition for each will help clear the fog from your thoughts. You may also get asked your views on research in general in this sort of debate. Try and avoid dogmatic responses – here and in the rest of the interview. If your unassailable viewpoint happens to contradict that of your interviewer, then you are faced with either an unseemly *volte face* or sticking to your guns in the face of rising animosity – neither will do you credit. The easiest way to avoid such a situation is to avoid being contentious in the first place. The panel may also want to know about any leanings you may have towards medical education or management – both of which are important additional responsibilities that the successful SpR must embrace.

Logbooks

For surgical specialities, your logbook will come under scrutiny. Be familiar with what you have done. It is probable that you will be asked about the level of operation that you feel competent to perform without supervision. There is a very fine line to tread here between being bold and demonstrating that you have a reasonable repertoire of procedures commensurate with – or perhaps a little above – your stage and claiming competence in something that you cannot safely do. Be prepared to take an interviewer through the principal steps of how *you* would perform any procedure you claim competence in. A discussion of your views on the diminution in SHO operating and potential solutions will also often be initiated by scrutiny of your logbook. Questions about how you actually define which procedures were "performed", "performed with assistance" or "assisted" are also common.

Other General Topics

The interview panel is at liberty to question you on anything they see fit – 'Why do you want to be a surgeon / physician etc?' is a standard opening gambit. Most committees often contain a lay member – ie. a non medic – and their contribution can vary greatly. A

common lay question is a friendly ‘What is your greatest personal achievement?’ but a torpedo such as ‘What are your views on the role of God in surgery?’ is not unheard of. In such cases avoid facetious replies as you risk offending the committee in the pursuit of cheap laughs. Such laughs are rarely cheap, as the outcome of the interview will demonstrate. It may be that the board question you on a subject that you truly have no knowledge. It is better to admit so gracefully and directly than embarking on a half-baked attempt at bluffing. Undeterred however, they may ask you to speculate. In such a case, sticking to first principles and proceeding slowly will serve well, but given a prior admission of ignorance they are unlikely to press the point too hard and your case is unlikely to have been damaged unless you are ignorant of a ‘major’ topic. Somewhere along the line you are likely to be asked some clinical questions. It is to be hoped that by the time you have got to an SpR interview such questions can be dealt with efficiently. Remember that the questioner is trying to ascertain ‘Would I trust this candidate to manage my patients in the middle of the night?’ Again, common sense and basic principles should be employed along with further admissions of inadequacy if necessary. The interviewer wants to hear that you would telephone your consultant *before* embarking on a midnight laparotomy rather than 2 hours into a deteriorating debacle. Many civilian interview panels will be interested in your military background and may ask you to expand on your experiences in the services and how this has influenced you both personally and professionally; know how your medical aspirations will fit into your future military career.

The Interview Committee

It is sometimes of use to find out who is on the committee. You are unlikely to be able to curry favour in advance, but knowing the background, speciality and outlook of the person questioning you may help you frame an answer in a less controversial manner and thus avoid confrontation.

Previous Candidates

If you are able talk to other candidates who have already been interviewed, perhaps on the previous day, then do so. The interview panel will only have a limited stock of questions and by talking to colleagues who have been before you, one can potentially gauge which topics are ‘hot’ and brush up accordingly.

The Day of the Interview

Stay calm. Remember that you are there on merit and there is no reason why you should not progress smoothly to a National Training

Number. Make sure you know where the interview is and where to park. Arrive in plenty of time to accommodate any last minute travel or parking hitches and bring any requested documentation such as log books. Be prepared to wait, as these interviews invariably run late, but do not assume they will. Ensure that you are well groomed and presentable. Conservative dress (traditionally cut suit, plain shirt and Service tie for example) may not be your normal inclination, however it will pay dividends as you will be interviewed by people who have, by definition, risen to the top of a naturally conservative profession. Any temptation towards flamboyance, perhaps in order to demonstrate individuality, should be resisted as it rarely achieves its aim.

The Interview

Enter confidently with a smile on your face and greet the assembled inquisition. Try and listen to who the individuals are, as again it might help in phrasing your responses. Adopt a neutral body posture - hands folded on lap or resting on knees. Do not under any circumstances put your hands in your pockets or fold your arms! Answer the questions in a calm and quietly confident manner. Try and disguise the abject fear and quaver in your voice which usually abates after the first 5 minutes or so. Admit your ignorance if necessary and avoid lies or bluffing at all costs. You *will* get found out and this paints you as dishonest and unreliable - qualities which consultants abhor in their registrar. When being questioned adjust your posture to make eye contact with the board member, but do not turn it into a game of ‘Who Blinks First Loses’. Do not argue with the panel. Your view on a given subject may seem acceptable to you, but if the board do not agree or even tell you outright that you are wrong, do not persist in pressing your point. Such disagreements lead to damaging and embarrassing arguments which serve only to antagonise the board members at your cost. Thank the interview panel as you leave.

Summary

By the time you attend an interview for a military SpR number you should have no real problems but it pays to be prepared. Begin preparations early, reading widely and talk to as many people as possible. Your consultants will have a useful viewpoint on the proceedings and may be able to help you refine your answers to the common questions. Arrive at your interview in a smart and timely fashion and answer questions with confidence and common sense. Avoid confrontation and bluff and be courteous at all times, whatever you may be feeling inside and thank the interview panel as you leave.