Selecting Plastic Surgery Residents: One Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

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This is the season that all Plastic Surgery program directors greet with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Unquestionably, the selection of a new class of residents carries with it a certain excitement. Will this year’s crop meet or even exceed expectations? The element of dread concerns the process—the laborious and difficult task of analyzing each applicant’s strengths and, in the end, actually selecting the most appropriate individuals for a particular program.

Since 1993, I have been involved in the selection of residents and I consider it one of my most important responsibilities. As would be expected, our program has had its share of outstanding residents along with a few we wish we could forget. Likewise, I am sure there are some residents who have less than fond memories of an attending surgeon with whom they have trained! The right match of a resident and program depends on a variety of factors, some of which are extremely difficult to evaluate through any application process, no matter how thorough.

Each member of our team has developed his or her own criteria for evaluating candidates. Our chief residents who participate in the selection process usually attempt to choose applicants with whom they feel they can get along, maybe go out drinking with, and who generally reflect or complement their own personality traits. Members of the faculty, on the other hand, have somewhat different criteria. We look for the ability to communicate with patients, reliability, and a work ethic and commitment that go beyond the standard 80 hours per week. Frankly, as a program director, I also look for residents who won’t create too much “trouble”—who won’t be in my office every week with unnecessary incident reports and interpersonal relationship problems. In addition, there is an expectation that past performance on written examinations is a predictor of future performance on the American Board of Surgery In-Training Examination (ABSITE), as well as In-Service and Qualifying Examinations for board certification. Consequently, we look for residents with a proven track record of good examination skills. Finally, I look for applicants who can enhance the reputation of our program. Residents who will take the initiative to write manuscripts and make presentations at national meetings raise the visibility of the program, helping us to further attract the best and brightest.

It is interesting to me that, as I become older, I seem to find the selection of residents more difficult than in years past—perhaps because I am well aware by now that our meticulous efforts to match the right people to our program are never 100% successful. Nevertheless, the process is always interesting. It usually begins in the summer, during which we have several dozen students rotate on the service. Then the applications start to come through the electronic match process. They include transcripts of medical school activity, letters of recommendation, United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) scores, pictures, personal statements, a Dean’s letter summarizing the applicant’s medical school performance, and more. Then another hundred or more e-mails from “someone who knows someone” come across my desk, each asking that a particular candidate be selected for an interview. From these hundreds of applications, we boil the candidate pool down to about 50 interviews that are conducted over a two-day period. At this point, chief residents and faculty still have a long road ahead. They must record their impressions from the interviews, summarize and collate all data concerning each applicant, develop a tentative ranking, make calls to those who wrote letters of recommendation, gather additional candidate information, and participate in more meetings—until, after five excruciating months, a final ranking list has been completed.

Recently, I became curious as to how the results of this lengthy process might compare to a hypothetical selection of residents based purely on first impressions. I emphasize that what I present here is not a scientific study and the evidence probably isn’t even Level V. That being said, I asked residents who did not participate in the preinterview evaluations to rank the applicants based solely on their submitted photographs. The residents that participated in this experiment saw none of the applicants’ other information; the order of preference was based only on first impressions from a picture. To my surprise, 50% of the top 10 applicants (5 of 10) selected by the residents by first impression (photograph) alone were also on the formal

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ranking list generated following the faculty’s elaborate and lengthy review process. This was also true for our top 20 applicants; ten of 20 applicants selected by first impression alone were on the list generated by the more formal process.

While it is true that chance alone could yield a 50% success rate and, also, there was an initial selection process that reduced the number of considered applicants to 50, it is nevertheless fascinating that the selections made by first impression were so closely aligned with the final ranking list (half of the top 20 finalists). While the ultimate performance of the selected residents is yet to be determined, my very unscientific experiment is at least provocative food for thought.

Next year I just might take the chance! Why not save the staff, faculty, and myself hours of laborious evaluations and review? Don’t they say “one picture is worth a thousand words”? Resident selection based on a picture alone may be as good a system as any. For the final picks, a toss of a coin would be entirely appropriate. Heads you’re “in,” tails you’re “out”!

Who knows, it just might work.