What is the value of an interview?

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*Take us through your curriculum vitae.
What are your strengths and weaknesses?
What are your aims and long-term plans?
What is audit . . . clinical governance . . . Modernising Medical
Careers . . . National Service Frameworks?
. . . and so on and so forth*

Hands up all those who have not heard this predictable, stereotypical set of questions. Anyone who has attended or is due to attend an interview, especially for registrar posts, will be acutely aware of them. Why one has to try and answer them at an appointed time, in formal dress, facing a panel of judges in a courtroom style, nerve-wracking face-off, in order to get a job, is simply beyond my comprehension.

One must remember that almost every candidate has a neat collection of interview questions, together with processed and rehearsed answers to them. So what is the point? Seasoned interview panel members may even know what answers to expect in response. Answers to questions about one's personal qualities are generally cleverly worded nuggets containing variable fractions of truth. Answers to questions concerning health-care policy or organizations are usually generic incantations—sometimes even definitions learnt by heart from the respective websites. Understandably, it is difficult for candidates to personalize answers beyond a certain extent. Some argue that *how* one answers these questions is what really matters, rather than *what* the actual answers are. But how this enlightens interview panellists about a candidate's true nature or abilities, is anyone's guess.

Human Resources departments state that, once selected for interview by virtue of curricula vitae or application forms, all candidates are on a level playing field. I am not sure how much allowance then is made for the inevitable and sometimes striking differences in the quality of experience and achievements between candidates. As an interview is the final step to success, I presume there must be some occult divinatory power in it—so what special information about an individual can be gleaned at an interview? Honesty? I doubt it, as the widely accepted

doctrine of interview technique preaches tempered honesty, at best. Emphasis is to be laid on what the panel likes to hear rather than what the candidate wants to say. Consider the question about weaknesses. Everyone has skeletons in their closets, but to confess to one would clearly be interview suicide. The politically correct way of handling this question is to subtly quote a strength, disguising it as a weakness. The most popular one is 'I am not good at delegating work. I tend to take too much upon myself.' How sweet. Can aptitude for a particular specialty or post be assessed? Difficult—judging an individual's aptitude for a specific field may be beyond the scope of a short interview. Can fluency of expression or language be assessed? Yes, but sensational oratory skills do not necessarily proclaim a candidate's suitability: this is not an audition for a theatrical role. Can a candidates' understanding of clinical or ethical dilemmas be tested? Yes, but with limitations—one must not overlook the fact that an interview is conducted in a manufactured setting which bears little semblance to real-life scenarios. Furthermore, a candidate with otherwise sound knowledge and capabilities may paint a false image of diffidence, indecision and incompetence as a result of sheer nervousness in a pressured interview room.

So what are the actual criteria that interviewers score against? Candidates are marked on their presentation and communication abilities, body language and perceived attitude, the so-called 'interview skills'. The ones with the top scores (i.e. those who 'interview well') get the jobs. The nub of my confusion lies here: are people that 'interview well' good doctors or academics? What actually is 'interviewing well'? Appearing confident, talking fluently, wearing a pleasant facial expression, spewing out colourful answers and having a flair for off-the-cuff remarks? Which of these identifies a good doctor, and which qualifies one better than another? Interviews can certainly help to prevent an inappropriate candidate from being appointed, but their usefulness and efficacy in converging on the best candidates is questionable. In fact, many interviewers themselves feel that interviews are not as perceptive as they are touted to be. Does the fact that one is liked and trusted by patients, colleagues and peers matter? Does the fact that one possesses a passion for what one does, and is actually good at it, get taken into account? Are there any assessment criteria or marks for these things? I do realize that references are considered, but I do not believe there is a

system for grading candidates basing on the quality of the same.

On balance, the candidate who conjures up an impressive show at the interview walks away with the job. What one says in those twenty-odd minutes matters more than what one has ever done, and determines the course of one's career. Having realized this gospel truth, I am now contemplating an apprenticeship in films or, better still, politics. This, without a doubt, will teach me to say the right things, no matter what I really think, and say them with conviction and flourish. I can then breeze through

interviews. But in reality, my game plan for the next rendezvous with an interview panel is this: I will start by upgrading my stockpile of questions, prepare more saleable answers for them, rehearse my act meticulously, hiding my fears and limitations, aiming to exude honesty, motivation and supreme confidence from every pore of my body. Any other bright ideas are, of course, welcome.

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