Short-listing for orthopaedic specialist registrar posts – what is important?

DOMINIC M NIELSEN, DAVID M RICKETTS

Department of Orthopaedics, Princess Royal Hospital, Haywards Heath, Surrey, UK

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION Competition for specialist registrar (SpR) posts in orthopaedics is high. The aim of the current study was to provide evidence-based advice for applicants applying for SpR posts in orthopaedics.

METHODS The short-listing forms of 273 applicants for orthopaedic SpR posts in South Thames (West) were reviewed. The experience of short-listed candidates was compared with those that were not.

RESULTS We have shown a high chance of being short-listed between 5 and 6 years after qualification with a sharp fall off either side of this. It is clear that a wide range of appropriate experience is more important than high volume and low quality experience in orthopaedics alone.

CONCLUSION Candidates who plan ahead and gain a broad experience have a better chance of progressing in an orthopaedic career. Good, early career advice is essential to achieve this.

KEYWORDS

Orthopaedics – Registrar – Training

CORRESPONDENCE TO

Mr D Nielsen, 122 Tattenham Grove, Epsom, Surrey KT18 5QS, UK. E: domnielsen@hotmail.com

Introduction

The specialty of orthopaedics is increasing in popularity. Trainees face stiff competition for specialist registrar (SpR) posts. Estimates in 1999¹ based on the stated preference of basic surgical trainees predicted that the ratio of eligible trainees wanting to do orthopaedics to the number of available SpR posts would rise from 3:1 in 1999/2000 to at least 7:1 in 2001/2002. In South Thames (West) there were 146 applicants for 8 posts (18:1) in 2002 and 127 applicants for 8 posts (15:1) in 2003.

Ilott and Bunch² concluded that the following could be expected of newly appointed registrars: (i) to have obtained MRCS; (ii) to be able to apply basic sciences to clinical situations; (iii) to have experience of a variety of hospitals and specialities; (iv) to appreciate the cost implications of different treatments; and (v) to be able to perform common operative procedures. Other than this, there is very little evidence-based advice to guide basic surgical trainees applying for higher surgical training.

The aim of this paper was to compare the experience of applicants for an orthopaedic SpR training programme that were short-listed with those that were not. A short-listing score was not used by the short-listing board.

Subjects & Methods

Study group

All 273 applicants for the South Thames (West) orthopaedic SpR training programme in 2002 and 2003 were included in the study.

Data collection

Each candidate completed a short-listing form as part of the application for an SpR post. The following data were obtained from the form:

1. Date of medical school graduation.
2. Months as senior house officer (SHO) in orthopaedics.
3. Months as registrar in orthopaedics.
4. Months as a research fellow.
5. Number of full publications.
6. Number of published abstracts.
7. Number of completed audit projects.
8. Number of general surgical procedures performed.
9. Number of surgical specialty procedures performed.
10. Number of orthopaedic procedures performed.
11. Place of basic training (teaching hospital or not).
12. Place of work at the time of application.
13. Whether the candidate was short-listed.

Table 1 Summary of significant factors

Variable	Comments
Number of years qualified	A curved relation, with 6 or 7 years leading to the highest chance of short-listing ($P < 0.001$)
Months as an orthopaedic SHO	More than 18 months leads to a lower chance of short-listing ($P < 0.001$)
Months as orthopaedic registrar	Although statistically significant ($P = 0.013$), this was mainly down to less chance of being short-listed with high values
Months of research	Longer times lead to higher chance of short-listing ($P = 0.003$)
Number of general surgical s procedure	More procedures lead to higher chance of short-listing ($P < 0.001$)
Number of plasters applied	Intermediate values lead to the highest chance of short-listing ($P = 0.014$)
Number of times applied traction	Intermediate values lead to the highest chance of short-listing ($P = 0.028$)
All other operative procedure	Although significant, this seemed to be down to the 'number of years qualified' effect
Worked at two or more teaching hospitals	Greater chance of short-listing if have worked at 2 or more teaching hospitals ($P = 0.005$)
Currently working in the region	Greater chance of short-listing if currently working in the region ($P = 0.001$)

Data analysis

The results were analysed using the Minitab (v. 15) statistics package (Minitab Inc., PA, USA). Each variable was first analysed separately against the chance of being short-listed. A multivariate logistic regression approach was then employed to produce a scoring system that included the most statistically significant attributes of the applicants.

Results

The results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. Using multivariate logistic regression and accounting for the number of years qualified (the most important factor), the three variables that were most significantly associated with being short-listed were: (i) not having spent longer than 18 months as an orthopaedic SHO; (ii) working at two or more teaching hospitals; and (iii) currently working in region. Using the scoring system below, only 5% of candidates with a score of less than 6 were short-listed.

Scoring system

- Score 4 for 4–6 years qualified, score 3 for 5 or 9 years qualified, score 2 for 4 or 10 years qualified and score 1 for 11 years qualified.
- Score 1 if the candidate has been an orthopaedic SHO for no more than 18 months.
- Score 1 if the candidate has performed at least 20 general surgical procedures.

- Score 1 if the candidate has worked at at least 2 teaching hospitals.
- Score 1 if the candidate is currently working in the region.

Discussion

Figure 1 demonstrates a narrow 'window of opportunity' available to trainees between 6 and 7 years after qualification at which they have the best chance of being short-listed for an orthopaedic SpR post in South Thames (West). There is a surprisingly sharp drop off before and after this. It is also evident from Figure 2 that an intermediate amount of operative experience is preferred over larger numbers of operations performed. This suggests that short-listing com-

Table 2 Factors not significantly influencing short-listing

Variable	Significance
Number of publications	$P = 0.23$
Number of abstracts	$P = 0.38$
Number of presentations	$P = 0.33$
Number of audits	$P = 0.54$
MSc	$P = 0.66$
Number of papers submitted	$P = 0.29$

Figure 1. Years qualified versus percentage chance of being short-listed.

mittees in South Thames (West) favour candidates demonstrating an ability to plan learning and experience, presenting themselves at an appropriate stage in their careers. They do not appear to want candidates demonstrating high volume, low quality experience.

It is evident from this study that many applicants for SpR posts have continued in basic training grades for too long. Our study demonstrates that they are unlikely to progress. These are the so called 'stuck doctors'. Evans *et al.*⁵ noted that, with increasing competition, it was important that trainees received realistic career advice at an early stage. Our results suggest that this group of people have not received this advice, to the detriment of their careers. Trainees should seek advice from recently appointed SpRs, the chairman of the local Surgical Training Committee and senior members of their department.

It has been stated^{4,5} that published research is an important factor in career progression. Surprisingly, in our series there was not a statistically significant association between being short-listed and the number of papers published ($P = 0.23$) or presentations given ($P = 0.33$). However, Figure 3 shows an apparent increase in the chance of being short-listed with an intermediate number of publications. A period of formal research improved the chance of short-listing ($P = 0.003$).

The current study demonstrates that a short period as an orthopaedic registrar and working in the region were both associated with a higher chance of being short-listed. No doubt due to the appointment of locum appointments for training (LATs) within the region to SpR posts. LAT posts provide an opportunity for both the trainers and the trainee to assess their suitability for the post. Similarly, programme directors in the US rated time spent at their institution as the most important factor in selecting a resident.⁶

Conclusions

The evidence from the current study dispels the myth that if basic trainees work for long enough in their chosen

Figure 2. Number of orthopaedic procedures versus percentage chance of being short-listed.

Figure 3. Number of publications versus percentage chance of being short-listed.

specialty, gain lots of operative experience and publish lots of papers, they will eventually progress.

In general, broad, high-quality, surgical and academic experience within the region are more important for short-listing. Good career advice is clearly an essential part of this process from the beginning of basic training.

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