

# The job interview process

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James' interest in medical education, especially that of early career doctors, grew during his role as the Director of Prevocational Education and Training at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney, from 2008 to 2014. This led to his current role as the NSW Prevocational Training Council Chair at the Health and Education and Training Institute (HETI). James works clinically as an Emergency Physician at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and is Director of the Department. The need to better prepare students for their first years of practice led James to take on the role of the Chair of the Sydney University Pre-internship (PRINT) block in 2012. James has a Masters in Medical Education from the University of Sydney. When not being a husband, father to two beautiful girls, juggling his multiple roles he loves to watch the Adelaide Crows (AFL) win and play tennis.

*\*This is a summary of a panel discussion held in 2014 on interview techniques held at [Royal Prince Alfred Hospital \(RPA\)](#). The original blog was published on [onthewards.org](#) in 2014.*

## Why an interview?

There has been an increase in the number of medical graduates and this has translated into more competition for vocational training places. It is difficult to separate junior doctors on their resumes alone with their experiences often being similar. But interview panels need to make decisions about appointing the right individual. The value of the interview has been argued but it can help discriminate between individuals and help rank the applicants. It can also help find the best fit for the training program, assess communication skills and hopefully screen out those with personality disorders.

Despite how impressive a curriculum vitae can look, the final question that most members of the interview panel ask is: do you want to work with this doctor? Do you want them to look after your patients (or your grandma)?

Interview panels have very short time (especially in comparison with jobs outside of health) to decide who they will offer jobs to.

## So how can you impress the interview panel in 15 minutes?

Interviewing well is a skill that needs to be practiced. It is not something that we do very often and yet it is a critical part of securing employment at all levels of medicine. Like preparing for an exam or an OSCE, the interview needs to be prepared for in the same way. Junior medical officers often underestimate the importance of this and only

realise it when it is too late. So start now, and remember to keep practicing this skill as you progress in your medical career.

## **Preparation is key**

It is important that you do your research prior to attending the interview. Hopefully, you have already met some of the interview panel and have visited the hospital prior to the interview. Further information can be gathered on the internet through college or hospital websites. Most hospitals or colleges will have a mission statement. This can sometimes provide a clue to qualities that they are looking for in individuals. You should have a good understanding of the job requirements and expectations and what type or rotations are available including rural secondments. You should also be aware of the teaching and research opportunities available and what linkages the hospital has with the University.

Be able to give specifics about how the training site or program will be able to help you reach your long term career goals. E.g. you want to train somewhere because they have a good training program. Why is a good training program important to you? Avoid saying because you just want to pass the exams....yes this is important but there is much more to being a great doctor than passing exams. Know what the site prides themselves on and what makes them different to other sites and use this information.

Speak to registrars who have previously been through the interview process about the style of questions and common themes covered. As will be mentioned later, don't rote learn answers.

There is no substitute for practicing in as real a scenario as possible. Try and put mock panels together and have a chance to practice your answers under pressure. You may even get someone to videotape you to watch your body language.

## **Read the selection criteria**

The questions should come from the selection criteria that you would have answered when you submitted your application. Review them prior to the interview.

## **Getting there**

Make sure that you double-check the date, time, and location of the interview. Have a phone number to ring if there are any last-minute hiccups that cause you to run late. Think of how you are going to travel to the interview and factor in the time to take to find a parking spot and traffic delays. Arrive for your interview 30 minutes early so that you can give yourself enough time to calm down.

## **How should you dress for the interview?**

For blokes, it is easy... suit up. Wear a tie as well. Tie clip optional but if Infectious Disease personnel are on the panel they will be happy! Females can wear a skirt, dress

or pantsuit or just something conservative and nice that shows you care about the way you present yourself.

Remember people who do not know you will interpret what you wear to reflect your work personality. Sloppy presentation may be interpreted as sloppy on the wards. Your appearance should show respect to the panel and signify that you are taking the process seriously. This is the situation to conform rather than stand out and if in doubt, overdress.

Despite all I have said, I don't think how you dress should determine whether you get the job. But when there are 90 good applications for 20 positions the little things count. Don't leave any variables in your control to chance.

## **Answer the question that is asked**

Don't provide an answer that tells them what you want them to hear but rather answer the question that has been asked. This often occurs when a candidate has prepared an answer to a question that has been asked previously. Beware, the interview panel often subtly changes the wording or the question. This is not to say that you shouldn't prepare for the interview by finding out what previous questions have been asked. Just listen to the question and don't regurgitate a rote learning response.

*"Ask not what the hospital can do for you, but what can you do for the hospital."* Dr Rob Hislop, Intensive Care Physician, RPAH

Many interviews provide an opportunity for doctors to tell the panel why they have applied for the job at this hospital or network. Most of what is said is how the hospital can provide education, training and opportunities for them. But what skills and experience do you have that you can bring to the hospital and make the workplace better?

If you asked about the qualities that you have, tell them about yourself (not somebody else).

Many questions try and explore the qualities you possess in the areas of leadership, teamwork etc. Most junior doctor answer with a list of generic descriptions of qualities but what the interview panel really wants to know is which qualities do you have and use examples from your life that illustrate these. This is what makes you more convincing and more memorable to the panel. Humans love to hear stories....let the panel know what your journey to this point has been. Your ability to reflect on this shows insight, an important skill required to be a good doctor.

This is also a chance to tell the panel about yourself as a person. If you can start with a medical example highlighting the skill and then bring in a non-medical example as well. This gives the impression of being well rounded and lets the panel know you as a person just that little bit better.

Try and humbly get across your achievements...."I was fortunate to have been awarded...." Or "I had the privilege of ....." However, you need to provide the interviewers with enough information to assist them in appointing you ahead of the other candidates.

## Provide the interview panel with a roadmap

Many candidates start answering a question and get lost. A preferred technique is to begin your response with headline statement and broad themes and then discuss them in more detail if required. For example, it is common for there to be a question related to patient safety with an adverse event resulting from an error or oversight.

The following themes could be highlighted at the start of your response - ensure patient safety - escalate to consultant - open disclosure to patient and family - incident reporting to prevent similar errors happening again - system approach to clinical errors - learn from experience and self-reflection

## How to answer a behavioural question

The STAR model can be used to answer behavioural questions in interviews. It provides a framework for talking about experiences which illustrate the competency being assessed. For example, some interview questions will start with a variation of “Tell me about a time when you displayed teamwork or leadership, managed a difficult interpersonal interaction” etc.

- *Situation*- describe the situation or context you were in - *Task*- describe the event/task that required resolution and what was required of you - *Activity*- what you actually did or happened, focus on the “why” as well as the “what” - *Result*- how the situation played out, what did you accomplish, what did you learn?

## Could they ask me a clinical question?

Yes. Clinical questions are some of the most discriminating. It is hard to prepare specifically for a clinical scenario but you should have confidence that your experience as a junior doctor on the ward should allow you to answer the questions well. The questions will not be looking at examining specific knowledge or facts but rather looking for a sound approach to a clinical problem. The key features may include resuscitation, focused history and examination, appropriate differential diagnosis, ordering of appropriate (and/ or interpretation) of investigations, escalation of care, communication with patient and family and basic initial management. There may be a patient safety theme in there as well.

## It is not just about what you say

On average it takes 7 seconds to form a first impression. As well as your appearance, your non-verbal communication is also very important. Smile during your interview, speak in a firm confident voice, demonstrate appropriate body language that suggests engagement with the interview (sit up straight, lean forward and ensure eye contact), use your hands (but not too much) and speak to all the panel although you can focus most of your attention on the questioner.

A nervous response is often to slouch back and appear relaxed to the panel, this never comes across well. Try and smile and be enthusiastic about what you are saying...panels

interviewing 30 people in a day can go into sleep mode with monotone, uninterested answers, so wake them up!

Some things not to do from my experience as an interviewer include: chew gum, answer your mobile phone, yawn or overdo the perfume/aftershave.

## Should you ask a question at the end of the interview?

Not routinely. A well-prepared candidate should have asked all their questions prior to the interview. Definitely, don't ask about rotations, pay, rosters, holidays or annual leave.

*"I have never thought more of an applicant who asked a question after the interview, but I have thought less."* Dr Peter Lim, Network Director of Physician Training, RPAH

The end of the interview can be an opportunity to summarise and tell the panel how much you want the job.

Whatever job interview you go to, you must want, or at least act like you want the job. You shouldn't apply for a job that you wouldn't take. Finally, be positive and authentic in all your communications and good luck in all your upcoming interviews.

*Help us to create a list of the [top 10 interview tips](#) for onthewards by submitting your top tips and tricks in the comments box below. We will publish the top 10 tips at the start of August 2016.*

### Related Blogs

- [Top 10 interview tips from 6 consultants](#)
- [Onthejobs Blog #6 - The Interview](#)

### Related Podcasts

- [Job interview preparation](#)

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