

# The Role of Letters of Recommendation in the Selection Process of Surgical Residents in Canada: A National Survey of Program Directors

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**OBJECTIVE:** Letters of recommendation (LOR) provide valuable information that help in selecting new residents. In this study, we aim to investigate the perceptions of surgical residency program directors (PDs) in Canada on the elements that can affect the strength and value of LOR.

**DESIGN:** Cross-sectional; survey.

**SETTING:** A national survey was conducted using an online questionnaire consisting of 2 main sections to collect data from PDs from all surgical subspecialties. The first section included basic background questions about the participant, such as the specialty and experience in selecting resident candidates, whereas the second section was about the elements and characteristics of LOR. Participants were asked to rate the importance of 34 different variables using a Likert scale.

**PARTICIPANTS:** Surgical PDs in Canada.

**RESULTS:** Of 122 PDs, 65 (53.3%) participated in the survey. Work ethic (57; 87.7%), interpersonal skills (52; 80.0%), and teamwork (49; 75.4%) were considered very important parts of the LOR by more than three-quarters of the PDs. Thirty-three (50.8%) PDs reported that a familiar

author of LOR would always affect their impression regarding the letter. Additionally, 57 (87.7%) and 35 (53.8%) directors thought that LOR are important in evaluating the candidates and can help in predicting the residents' performance during their residency training.

**CONCLUSIONS:** LOR are important for the selection of new surgical residents in Canada. Information about the candidate's work ethic, interpersonal skills, and teamwork is essential for a good LOR. Familiarity of PDs with authors of LOR could increase the value of the letter. (J Surg Ed ■■■■-■■■. © 2017 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

**KEY WORDS:** residency, resident, admission, selection, recommendation letter, surgery

**COMPETENCIES:** Interpersonal and communication skills

## INTRODUCTION

The process of selecting new residents for postgraduate (residency) programs is complex. A number of authors have shown that certain factors, if present, could increase the chances of an applicant getting accepted.<sup>1-6</sup> These factors include good performance during medical school, research experience, electives in the designated specialty, excellent pre-entry examination scores (e.g., United States Medical License Examination, Medical Council of Canada Evaluating

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Examination), strong letters of recommendation (LOR), and good interview performance.

Studies have shown that LOR provide useful information about the applicant's strengths and weaknesses (e.g., clinical performance, interpersonal skills).<sup>7-9</sup> Nevertheless, LOR sometimes miss key factors that can be used to assess the quality of the applicant.<sup>10</sup> Several researchers have suggested that unless LOR are standardized, they are considered subjective, and may be vague, inconsistent, and unreliable predictors of residents' future performance.<sup>10-14</sup> Further, significant variability in the interpretation of LOR was found among those involved in selecting new residents.<sup>15</sup> These facts indicate that the authors' and readers' understanding of the content of LOR can affect the value of this important evaluation tool for admission into residency programs.

In Canada, surgical residency training programs are accredited by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. The process of selecting residents to be trained in these high-quality programs is perceived as challenging, yet this process has not been investigated in detail. In general, candidates applying for surgical residency programs are expected to have specific skills (e.g., surgical skills, manual dexterity, and visual spatial ability) not required by those applying to nonsurgical residency programs. Therefore, the process of selecting surgical residents may be different.

Directors of surgical residency programs may read hundreds of LORs, so their perceptions of various elements of the letters will add to our understanding of their importance in the selection process. Previous studies have evaluated the information provided in these letters and also the accuracy and reliability of their interpretation by program directors (PDs).<sup>7,8,9,12,15</sup> Other authors investigated the possibility of using a standardized LOR for the selection of residents.<sup>13,14</sup>

Nevertheless, we found little evidence about what makes LOR valuable to PD when selecting new residents. We, therefore, aim to study the perceptions of PDs of all surgical residency training programs across Canada about elements that affect the strength and value of LORs used in the process of residency application. We believe that this study may assist authors of LOR in writing higher-quality letters to improve the process of assessing and selecting new candidates.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This descriptive, cross-sectional study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of our institution. A questionnaire was developed based on the available literature and the authors' experience with the selection process. It was divided into 2 sections. The first section included 8 basic background questions about the participant, such as the specialty and experience in selecting

resident candidates. None of the questions revealed the identity of the respondents. The second section was divided into 3 subsections, including a total of 46 questions about the elements and characteristics of LOR. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all; 4 = very important), the participants were asked to rate the importance of including 21 specific characteristics about the applicant in the LOR. Then, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = does not affect my impression at all; 5 = always affects my impression), they were also asked if 15 characteristics of the author of the LOR would affect their impression. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked 10 general "yes-no" questions about the LOR.

The draft questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts in medical education at our institution and was revised based on their suggestions. The revised version was then sent to a group of attending surgeons who had experience in the process of selecting new residents, and it was further modified according to their recommendations. An online questionnaire was then created ([Appendix](#)).

A national survey was carried out during May and June, 2016. The contact details of the PDs were gathered from the websites of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the Canadian Resident Matching Service. An invitation e-mail including a clear explanation of the objectives of the study was sent to the PDs and their administrative assistants. Reminder e-mails were sent twice during the data collection period. A total of 122 PDs of cardiac surgery, general surgery, head and neck surgery—otolaryngology, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, orthopedic surgery, plastic surgery, urology, and vascular surgery were invited to participate in the online survey.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17.0 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL). Descriptive results in the form of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were obtained for the different variables. A  $p < 0.05$  was considered as the cutoff level of statistical significance. The association between a binary qualitative variable (i.e., program) and an ordinal qualitative one was assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

## RESULTS

Of 122 PDs, 65 (53.3%) participated in the survey ([Table 1](#)). Cardiac surgery PDs had the lowest response rate (4/12; 33.3%), whereas the highest response rate was from urology PDs (9/13; 69.2%). The mean years of experience of the participants as directors or associate PDs of a residency program in Canada was  $4.3 \pm 3.0$  years.

The experience of the participants in reviewing and writing LOR for residency applicants is summarized in [Table 2](#). Only 2 (3.1%) directors did not have any experience in reviewing or writing LOR. Most of them (41; 63.1%) had developed their own guidelines on how to

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