Commentary: The importance of equity in letters of recommendation in residency and fellowship applications

Rishindra M. Reddy, MD, MBA

Yong and colleagues\(^1\) provide an in-depth look at the significant differences in letters of recommendation (LORs) written for and by men and women for cardiothoracic fellowships. The authors demonstrate different styles of writing influenced by the gender of the letter writers, as well as differences in the LOR writers based on the gender of the applicant. The core issue outlined by this interesting study is the equity, or potential lack of equity, in a person’s application, in this case based on gender. This is of critical importance, as LORs will continue to take on a more important and central role in residency and fellowship applications. Although this particular study was on fellowship applicants, the same writers are creating LORs for medical students applying for residency. As Step 1 has gone to pass/fail, the Step 2 examination is already being used as an alternative surrogate to mark an applicant’s academic strength. The grades of core clerkships have always been difficult to interpret, with the top grade (Honors) being given to a range of 2% to 93% of students.\(^2\) Many schools are considering moving to Pass/Fail for their core clinical rotations to reduce student anxiety about grades. LORs will have increasing importance in this context.

Emergency medicine has used standardized LORs for the past 20+ years, with the goal to minimize the subjective nature of written evaluations.\(^3\) Standardized LORs provide for an improved point of reference on how to judge these recommendations, with more granularity on how long the letter writer has known the applicant, in what context, etc. Even when using standardized formats, however, there can still be inconsistency in LORs. Neurosurgery chairs, using standardized LORs, reported more than 58% of students being in the top 5% in a recent study.\(^4\) In the traditional LOR format, letters written for female applicants are not always “worse” either, as a recent study from otolaryngology suggested that female applicants had more favorably written letters than their male counterparts.\(^5\) Another study from minimally invasive gynecology, where most of the letter writers were female, suggested no differences in the LORs based on linguistic analysis.\(^6\) Equity and transparency in the LORs are needed, with or without the standardized format.

The current process of the application and match will continue to change considerably over the next few years as programs determine their new “norms,” with virtual interviews, a lack of grades, and LORs that will need to have more details and consistency than the current ones have. Letter writers in all of medicine will need formal training to limit, if not eliminate, bias, as well as how to better communicate in as transparent a manner as possible. Cardiothoracic surgery and the Thoracic Surgery Directors Association will need to develop their own standards. In the future, a female general surgery program director’s letter

---

From the Section of Thoracic Surgery, Department of Surgery, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Disclosures: Dr Reddy reports consulting fees from Intuitive Surgical, AtriCure, Auris Health, Genentech, Medtronic, On Target Laboratories.

The Journal policy requires editors and reviewers to disclose conflicts of interest and to decline handling or reviewing manuscripts for which they may have a conflict of interest. The editors and reviewers of this article have no conflicts of interest.

Received for publication May 6, 2023; accepted for publication May 15, 2023.

Address for reprints: Rishindra M. Reddy, MD, MBA, Section of Thoracic Surgery, Department of Surgery, University of Michigan, 1500 East Medical Center Dr, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 (E-mail: reddyrm@med.umich.edu).

J Thorac Cardiovasc Surg 2023;:1-2
0022-5223/36.00
Copyright © 2023 by The American Association for Thoracic Surgery
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcvs.2023.05.006
should carry similar weight to that of a cardiothoracic surgery society/association president. Yong and her coauthors have made an important contribution in this process.

References