

Have Personal Statements Become Impersonal? An Evaluation of Personal Statements in Anesthesiology Residency Applications

Bryan Max, MD.; Brian Gelfand, MD; Meredith Brooks, MD, MPH; Rena Beckerly, MD, MBA; Scott Segal, MD, MS
Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) Dept. of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine

Learner Audience: Academic anesthesiology training programs

Background: The electronic residency application service (ERAS) is used by anesthesiology residency programs to help facilitate applicant selection. In addition to objective data, applicants are required to submit a personal statement as part of their ERAS application. The subjective nature of the statement makes it a unique and valuable tool in an effort to help identify those to be selected for an invitation to interview. Anecdotally, the personal statement has been used to help differentiate between applicants who have similar academic records. However, readers at our institution have found an increasing number of essays each year that tend to share common features. No study has systematically evaluated the content of these statements.

Hypothesis: Analysis of content of personal statements would demonstrate frequent discussion of common themes and a general lack of originality. The Program Directors reading these statements would not find them particularly useful during the resident selection process.

Method Design: The prevalence of 13 specific essay features and eight quality ratings was calculated for the essays and correlated with other aspects of the residency application abstracted from the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) files for all 2006 applicants to BWH. Six question survey regarding use of personal statements was collected from program directors. A total of 670 essays were evaluated.

Outcome: Interest in physiology and pharmacology, enjoyment of a hands-on specialty, and desire to comfort anxious patients were each mentioned in more than half of the essays. However, the overall rating of "original" was strongly positively correlated with the number of commonly discussed features. Higher quality ratings were also strongly associated with graduation from a U.S. or Canadian medical school, applicant file screening score, invitation for interview, female gender, and younger age. More than 90% of program directors found proper use of English to be a somewhat or very important feature of the essay. However, only 41% found the personal statement overall to be very or somewhat important in selecting candidates for interview invitations.