

Trainees' Forum

Job Hunting in London, 1984

KEVIN HEALY, Senior Registrar, Claybury Hospital, Woodford Green, Essex

I have just spent 18 months searching for a job to continue higher psychiatric training in the London area. In connection with this quest, I wrote many letters, made numerous telephone calls, spoke with more than 50 consultant psychiatrists in 11 teaching hospital settings, investigated and considered 23 advertised posts, applied for 16, was shortlisted for 12, withdrew from one and was interviewed for 12, before finally being offered a job which I was happy to accept.

While my experience as an Irish person, intent on a psychoanalytic training, is personal and unique, I recognize that many others have had, are having or will have similar experiences. It is now not unusual to have 12 or more applicants for a lecturer post, or 40 or more applicants for a senior registrar post in psychiatry in any of the London teaching hospitals. In this article, I hope to share some of my experiences of 18 months spent in the bottleneck of psychiatry. If it provokes comment and discussion on this—a very real and neglected step in the career ladder—it will partly help to redress much of the sadness, disappointment, but eventual happiness, which accompanied this quest.

Background

I am 30 years old and married to an understanding and supportive wife. I do not come from a medical background and am grateful to my parents for the opportunities I now have. I qualified from University College Dublin in 1977 and on completing house officer jobs in surgery and medicine, and senior house officer jobs in paediatrics, neonatal paediatrics and obstetrics, I entered psychiatry in October 1979. My psychiatric training in Dublin was comprehensive. I completed the MRCPsych in November 1982. I then hoped to combine a higher psychiatric training with a training at the Institute of Psychoanalysis. I recognized the importance of biological, psychological and social factors in the 'preservation of normality' as well as in the aetiology, pathogenesis, presentation and management of all illness.

Approach

My reasons for choosing to further my psychiatric career in London were many. I was aware of the limited opportunities to obtain a broad and comprehensive senior registrar training in such a homogeneous setting as Ireland. Opportunities to work with different cultural and ethnic groups exist in abundance in London. There are many centres of 'academic and clinical excellence' (adjectives which often cannot be used to describe one single centre) in

general psychiatry and psychotherapy in London.

Application, initial interviews and provisional acceptance at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, and the subsequent choice of a training analyst preceded the move to London. Training analysis has proceeded concurrently with job hunting and has no doubt influenced my reactions and feelings. More relevant, in relation to this article, are the responses and reactions of others to psychoanalytic training. I will mention some of these presently.

The classified advertisements section of the *British Medical Journal* had become essential weekly reading. From the lists of contributors to psychiatric journals from in and around the London area, I drew up lists of 'probably influential people' and also people whose contributions appealed to me. The visit of the Dean of the Institute of Psychiatry and an external Professor of Psychiatry to Dublin provided the opportunity for me to make initial contacts, and to obtain the names, addresses and titles of all heads of Psychiatric Departments in the London Teaching Hospitals. I wrote to the above mentioned people and enclosed a much photocopied curriculum vitae. I received courteous replies from most and arranged a number of appointments on one of three week-long visits to London in the six months before my final move. During this early phase of job hunting I was offered two jobs, both research posts with Honorary Senior Registrar status. Neither was exactly what I wanted and I accepted neither. This early 'success' promoted a false optimism about the ease of job hunting in London and I moved here rather naively in July 1983.

Jobs

I have always liked to 'keep my options open' and initially I considered a training in general psychiatry, in psychotherapy, in academic psychiatry, and a number of research options. There were advantages and disadvantages in each approach, but I felt my chances of obtaining a job would be better if I considered all possibilities.

I applied for three senior registrar posts in psychotherapy. The uncertainty about my commitment at that stage to a full-time psychotherapy training was certainly reflected at interview and must be partly responsible for my not being offered any of these posts. I enjoy teaching and research and was interviewed for lecturer posts in psychiatry at three London Teaching Hospitals. The competition was intense, I had no publications, I was doing a psychoanalytic training, I was unsuccessful. While well aware of the importance of research experience I was not

successful in obtaining either of the two research jobs which interested me. A third post for which I was considered was eventually not funded. Partly in response to what was on offer, and partly due to a clarification of my aims and objectives, I set myself to applying for senior registrar jobs in general psychiatry. I was interviewed on four occasions and was successful on 6 April 1984, 18 months in total after starting the search for a job.

Personal

The move from Dublin, the leaving of family, friends, social life and a comfortable home, was difficult. The move to London, to insecurity and uncertainty, was even more so. Locum jobs were not hard to obtain. I worked for five weeks at the London Hospital as senior house officer, seven weeks at Atkinson Morley's Hospital as registrar and five months again at the London Hospital as senior registrar. I obtained these posts through contacts made on earlier visits and by scrutinizing the classified advertisement section of the *British Medical Journal*.

My mood varied much throughout this time. Finding out about a job, psyching myself up for interview, fantasizing about my future if successful, contrasted sharply with the moods of sorrow, despair, bitterness, guilt and self-blame which followed another failure. It was hard for me to come to terms with failure as I, like so many other privileged medical graduates, had been largely protected from it.

A number of situations were particularly infuriating. Being interviewed by an eminent professor who yawned openly as I talked was upsetting. Even more so was the professor who yawned openly as he himself talked! It was baffling to meet the consultant named in an advertisement and find that he was not interested in clinical, research or teaching experience.

I now recognize these occurrences as indicating that there is a 'strong contender' for the job and regret wasting so much time and effort. I also recognize that 'we are neutral here about a candidate doing a psychoanalytic training' really means non-approval of such training. I am reminded of a letter I received from the Institute of Psychiatry: 'It is somewhat difficult to know how best to advise you, given that you have already decided on a training at the Institute of Psychoanalysis. In my experience it is very difficult to marry such a training with a very demanding, time-consuming and intellectually provoking training in psychiatry, as is provided at the Joint Hospitals and the Institute. There are one or two people here at the Maudsley who do try and do both, but I certainly feel, and many of my colleagues likewise, that their training here suffers and certainly their ability to carry out any kind of psychiatric research is seriously impaired. There is considerable emphasis at the Institute and Joint Hospitals on the importance of developing a research attitude and interest, and I am not absolutely sure that this goes well with a commitment to psychoanalytic training.'

Only in three non-specialist psychotherapy settings have I felt comfortable in disclosing my interest in psychotherapy and dynamic psychiatry: St George's Hospital,

University College Hospital, and Claybury/London Hospitals. My disappointment was more intense on not being successful in two of these situations. It was also very difficult to return to the same setting for an interview for a second job. This I did on three occasions with very mixed feelings. In a further three situations I could not bring myself to reapply.

The 'strong contender'

I bear no malice towards the 'strong contender', being one myself, perhaps, on more than one occasion. I do, however, feel bitter about the situation when I was the only other candidate short-listed along with the 'strong contender'. The senior lecturer with whom I had an appointment to discuss the post 'forgot' the appointment and had left his office when I arrived. Coincidence? I was not appointed. I was also angry to hear that a candidate was known by his colleagues to be assured of getting a particular job which I thought was open. I had not done my homework. On hearing that a candidate for another job was a certainty because he played golf with the right people, I knew he had done his homework.

At an appointments committee, where one candidate stands out in terms of clinical, research or teaching experience, he then will be the 'strong contender'. However, in most situations there are, probably, a number of candidates, any of whom is appointable in terms of experience. This is becoming the usual situation in the London area. In this case interview performance will have a large bearing. So, too, will contacts already made, directly or indirectly, with members of the appointments committee. These prior contacts may then identify the 'strong contender'.

Other factors which may influence the process of selection at a conscious or subconscious level are age, sex, race, nationality and religion of the candidate or committee members. I recall hearing, on the Sunday prior to a Monday interview, of bomb attacks in the London area. I was much relieved to hear an Arab group claim responsibility.

Advice

Is it possible for me to be objective about this whole experience? Certainly this is a time of high emotion, relief and happiness. With this new found security, it is now possible to be aware of other more mixed emotions, thus explaining some of the content of this article. If asked to give advice I would make the following points: (1) plan well in advance what you want to do; (2) be open to research experience throughout your career; (3) take care in preparing your c.v.—a good c.v. gets you shortlisted; (4) be political, make the contacts; (5) at interview be assertive and confident and do not always try to please; (6) like Bruce's spider, do not give up.

My long and arduous search is now ended. I am well pleased with the end result. I have gained much knowledge of the London Psychiatric Scene and hope this will prove to be of use in my future career.