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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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VIRTUAL MMED CANDIDATE INTERVIEWS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

A. G. Bedada, J. L. Tarpley and M. J. Tarpley

With postgraduate training beginning each January in Botswana and some other southern African countries, residency applicants at University of Botswana (UB) are selected in September and October. Botswana's Covid-19 pandemic response began with a 1st April 2020 lockdown closing borders, banning domestic and international flights, banning large gatherings, closing schools and nonessential businesses, restricting intra-country travel as well as mandating masks and social distancing. In June, some restrictions eased; but into September, large gathering were limited, and masks remained mandatory with sign-ins at every business and institution.

While schools, including UB, opened in August with some face-to-face small groups allowed in the medical school, non-essential gatherings were discouraged. In mid-September, the UB surgery resident applicant folders were received by the Surgery Department for arranging interviews as quickly as possible.

Currently in its first year, surgery had only held one previous residency interview which involved traditional face-to-face sessions with candidates, some who travelled long distances. The 2020 interviews required social distancing and safety for interviewees and interviewers. Because current instruction at UB is often via Zoom or similar video conferencing platforms, Zoom interviews for all candidates were scheduled. The primary negative was possible Wi-fi connectivity issues, either for faculty or applicants. The positives were that all candidates would have equal opportunity to be present (one was from outside the country and a second from hundreds of kilometres distant), social distancing would be maintained with all participants in homes or offices, zero travel expenses, and no work or family obligations would be unduly disturbed.

The one-week process from arrangement through interviews involved:

- Choosing a day that fitted faculty schedules (Friday, 25 September 2020)
- Scheduling an all-day Zoom meeting for that Friday from 7:30 am – 6:30 pm (required paid Zoom subscription)
- Contacting the 17 applicants to inquire about their preferences for morning or afternoon slots
- Creating an interview schedule with 30-minute interview blocks with a midday 30-minute break
- Sending each applicant an invitation to the meeting with date and time plus instructions to sign into Zoom “waiting room” 15 minutes ahead of scheduled time

- Sending applicants and faculty the link to a Harvard Business School article, “9 tips for mastering your next virtual interview” [1]
- Designating a non-interviewer “room” manager to control applicant entrance/exit

The only hitch in the entire day was when one candidate temporarily lost connection for a couple of minutes. Thirty-minute blocks proved more than adequate for faculty questions as well as applicant questions. Most sessions ran about 25 minutes. The chair had candidate phone numbers at hand and called several when they would be able to sign in ahead of their scheduled time—calling also could have been necessary if the sessions ran long.

The first half hour at 7:30 am permitted a faculty discussion of the format, question assignments, scoring system, and follow-up plan. Interviews commenced at 8:00 am and concluded at 5:00 pm. The final action was the post-interview faculty wrap-up. The consensus opinion declared the process a success.

REFERENCE

1. Landry L. 9 tips for mastering your next virtual interview. Harvard Business School Online. Business Insights. 03 Oct 2018. <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/virtual-interview-tips> . Accessed 28 Sept 2020.