Editorial

A Case for the Standardized Letter of Recommendation in Otolaryngology Residency Selection

As we approach the frenzied peak of the residency application season, the leadership council of the Otolaryngology Program Directors' Organization (OPDO) wishes to endorse the standardized letter of recommendation as a means of both streamlining the residency selection process and better enabling our specialty to select the best applicants for training.

Inarguably, one of the most critical elements of the residency application is the letter of recommendation (LOR). Applicants typically submit three to four LORs, traditionally written in a narrative style. On average, according to a 2008 study, otolaryngology narrative letters of recommendation (NLORs) contained 329 words apiece, about the length of half of this article.[1]

During the 2012 application season, the OPDO introduced a standardized letter of recommendation (SLOR). This letter template contains a few simple sections: *background* (2 questions regarding the duration and nature of contact between letter writer and applicant), *qualifications* (7 questions assessing the applicant's skills, such as in the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education competencies), and *global assessment* (3 general questions about the applicant). A comment section at the end allows for narrative explanation, if desired, to elaborate or add information not covered by the other sections. In addition, letter writers are given the option of attaching a traditional NLOR at the end.

To assess the effectiveness of the SLOR, a survey was sent out to program directors (PDs) and chairs at the end of the application season. Of the 56 respondents, 38 were PDs and 12 were chairs; six others represented other faculty members, program coordinators, and an associate PD.

TABLE I.
Survey results of respondents who read SLOR.

For Those Who Read SLOR in Their Review of Residency Applications			
Compared with the narrative (or traditional) letters of recommendation (NLOR), please rate the standardized letter of recommendation in terms of:	Better	Same	Worse
Its ability to discriminate differences between candidates	49%	27%	0%
Its ability to save time reading letters of recommendation	81%	17%	0%
Its ability to express relevant and useful information to residency programs	49%	27%	0%

SLOR = standardized letter of recommendation.

TABLE II.
Survey results of respondents who completed SLOR.

For Those Who Completed SLOR on Behalf of Residency Applicants			
Compared with the narrative (or traditional) letters of recommendation (NLOR), please rate the standardized letter of recommendation in terms of:	Better	Same	Worse
Its ability to save time	82%	14%	0%
Its ability to allow me to provide comparative information on the applicant more efficiently	82%	9%	9%
Its ability for me to convey information that is relevant and useful for residency programs	62%	23%	9%

SLOR = standardized letter of recommendation.

The results are listed in the tables below.

Also of interest were the comments, which surfaced global issues about letters of recommendation. One issue is that the utility of the LOR depends largely on letter writers' collective honesty, as described in this response: "I hope that all writers treat them [the SLOR] honestly and all readers evaluate them fairly, recognizing that not all great residents can get the top checks on the SLOR." The other issue is the concern that letter authors have of sinking an applicant's chances of residency by being truthful: "If people are honest and rate someone only in the top $\frac{1}{3}$, that student is greatly hurt in his/her chances for matching even though they may be great." Suffice it to say that these are issues surrounding letters of recommendation at large.

It is clear from our survey results that those who completed the survey view the SLOR as relevant and useful, and also time-efficient. Of note, a recent study demonstrated better inter-rater reliability using a similar SLOR compared to NLOR. It also found the SLOR to require significantly less interpretation time.[2]

Unlike other application assessment criteria, such as grades, dean's letters, U.S. Medical Licensing Examinations, and personal statements, the LOR is one that we can have direct influence over as a specialty. Widespread and honest use of the SLOR will help simplify a time-consuming and often complicated application review process. In short, the SLOR has the potential, ultimately, to better serve our specialty.

Please find the template for the Otolaryngology SLOR in both Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF formats at: http://www.suo-aado.org/.

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2. Perkins JN, Liang C, McFann K, Abaza MM, Streubel SO, Prager JD. Standardized letter of recommendation for otolaryngology residency selection. *Laryngoscope* 2013;1:123–133.