An Embarrassment of Riches

I applaud the efforts of Holmes et al (Pediatrics 2014;133:766–768) to provide guidance to clinicians asked to write narrative evaluations of medical students. As the authors correctly point out, thoughtful comments “provide meaningful feedback to the student about performance, and formulate strong statements for the Medical Student Performance Evaluation,” or MSPE.

I have 1 concern related to the second function that remains to be addressed: how best to convey those comments to the end-users, program directors, and their residency selection committees.

This past year our institution received 934 applications for 16 residency positions, figures that I know are not unique. The average MSPE is ~8 to 10 pages long. Most of the component clerkship evaluation reports contain quotations from the narrative comments written by the clinical evaluators. How to capture the essence of a student without overwhelming the capacity of those end-users is a challenge for a clerkship director like me who is charged with the task of submitting a course performance report for every student who completes the clerkship.

In recognition of that fact our institution has recently imposed a 1500-character limit for the narrative portion of the clerkship performance reports, the meat of the MSPE. It’s not unusual to receive an average of more than 10 evaluations with their comments per student. An amount of 1500 characters is not a lot of characters. It’s easy to edit out the “Nice job” and the “Will succeed at any…” but it is much more difficult to abbreviate the more valuable and thoughtful comments like the 2 examples presented in the article, 1 positive (742 characters) and 1 constructive (1027 characters), each comment representing one-half to two-thirds of the character allotment I would be allowed on any individual clerkship performance report.

As a member of our residency selection committee I welcome the effort to reduce the reading burden that comes with residency selection, but as a clerkship director I now find myself more in the role of an editor than a reporter in creating individual student clerkship performance reports.

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Although I recognize the value of thoughtful comments, I am concerned about the potential for being overwhelmed by an embarrassment of riches.

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In Reply

We thank Dr Rockney for his thoughtful reply to our article. We too are awash in medical student narrative comments with no structure to their reporting. P.R.I.M.E.+ provides a framework for individual narratives but can also be used to synthesize many student observations into succinct narratives that can fit character limits.

For example, a clerkship director or associate dean can look at many student observations and write the following: “We have had the opportunity to see medical student Lopreiato in several contexts during his time in medical school. Reports from supervisors and peers consistently show that Mr Lopreiato is always professional in appearance and demeanor and works well with our staff and patients. He is a reliable and honest reporter of medical information and his oral and written work reflect well on his ability to organize the data into meaningful units. He is able to interpret medical data well and uses his fund of knowledge to formulate credible diagnoses based on the data he has obtained. He can construct good management plans appropriate for his level of training. He is a self-directed learner with an aspiration to be a medical educator.” Word count = 735 characters, with room left for specific examples if desired.

P.R.I.M.E.+ can also be used to write letters of recommendation for residents seeking fellowship, for the same characteristics that make medical students good residents can be used for fellowship applicants as well.

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