

**The ethical conundrum of writing a recommendation letter for someone you would not recommend**



**Dear Dr Dermatoethicist:** I am an attending at an academic institution. I was recently asked to write a letter of recommendation for a medical student applying to dermatology residencies. I have worked with this individual on several occasions and do not feel that they would be well-suited for dermatology residency. In good faith, I cannot write a positive letter of recommendation for them. What should I do?

— Conflicted Writer

**Dear Conflicted Writer:** To write a letter of recommendation for someone you do not feel is qualified for a position is problematic and involves the ethical principles of nonmaleficence, justice, and truthfulness.

Nonmaleficence, avoiding intentional harm, is at play because a poor letter will hurt the candidate but a good letter might hurt the institution, future patients, and other applicants. As a letter writer, you have conflicting responsibilities to the trainee and the institution receiving your recommendation. The trainee, whose future position somewhat depends on your letter, likely anticipates, by your agreement to write this letter, a positive recommendation from you. A negative, or even lukewarm, letter may significantly hurt their career prospects.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the institution receiving the letter expects an honest evaluation of the candidate. An unwarranted positive letter may lead the institution to accept someone unqualified for the position,<sup>1-3</sup> hurting the department, future patients, and other applicants who were more deserving of the residency position. Justice for all applicants and residency programs suggests that the best applicants should obtain residency positions.

Writing a letter that does not reflect the trainee's abilities may damage your reputation as a truthful ethical reference. In addition to hurting your reputation for integrity, the institution may give less regard to your future recommendations, thereby hurting other trainees who are more qualified, again impacting justice for all applicants.

In this scenario, beneficence to this student, truthfulness, and justice for residency programs

and other applicants suggest that you let the trainee know that he or she would likely receive a stronger letter from other referees. For applicants who understand this and want you to write a letter regardless, it is appropriate to write a letter that accurately reflects the applicant's skills and attributes. For applicants who are severely underqualified and may put patients at risk, we recommend refusing to write a letter altogether. Although a difficult conversation, it is better than writing a poor letter that may hurt the trainee's career prospects or an unwarranted positive letter that may harm the institution considering the trainee and more qualified applicants.

This situation may be complicated when the application process requires a specific attending to write a recommendation for a trainee applying for residency. For example, a medical student applying for residency may need a letter of recommendation from their program director or department chair, regardless of that person's feelings about the student. In this scenario, obtaining more information about the individual from other attendings and being honest and objective, while remaining impartial, is the best course of action. This may mitigate issues arising from personality mismatches between a trainee and an attending.<sup>3</sup>

— Dr Dermatoethicist

Sonal Muzumdar, BS,<sup>a</sup> Jane M. Grant-Kels, MD,<sup>b,c</sup> and Hao Feng, MD, MHS<sup>b</sup>

From the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, Farmington<sup>a</sup>; the Department of Dermatology, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington<sup>b</sup>; and the Department of Dermatology, University of Florida, Gainesville.<sup>c</sup>

Funding sources: None.

Conflicts of interest: Dr Feng is a consultant and medical monitor for Cytrellis Biosystems Inc. Sonal Muzumdar and Dr Grant-Kels have no conflicts of interest to declare.

IRB approval status: Not applicable.

Reprint requests: Hao Feng, MD, MHS, Department of Dermatology, University of Connecticut Health Center, 21 South Rd, 2nd Floor, Farmington, CT 06032

E-mail: [haofeng625@gmail.com](mailto:haofeng625@gmail.com)

**REFERENCES**

1. Saudek K, Saudek D, Treat R, Bartz P, Weigert R, Weisgerber M. Dear Program Director: deciphering letters of recommendation. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2018;10(3):261-266.
2. Garmel GM, Grover CA, Quinn A, et al. Letters of recommendation. *J Emerg Med*. 2019;57(3):405-410.
3. Larkin GL, Marco CA. Ethics seminars: beyond authorship requirements-ethical considerations in writing letters of recommendation. *Acad Emerg Med*. 2001;8(1):70-73.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaad.2020.01.053>