

Sabotaging Your Curriculum Vitae

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The curriculum vitae (CV) serves many important roles for a physician. Your CV is your representative—an interface with the world, especially for physicians in academic medicine. It may be required for employment, promotion, salary adjustments, hospital privileges, membership in societies, introductions, awards, and many other roles. Despite this importance, few of us have had any formal instruction in how to prepare a CV. For example, a survey of radiology residents in Canada revealed that only 12% had received such guidance.¹

Errors in CVs commonly undermine their effectiveness. Most of us prepare our CVs by mimicking the CV of an older colleague. Depending on the model chosen, however, mimicry may only perpetuate problems. Some academic institutions require use of their own CV template; these may not be optimal outside the institution. Similarly, the CV for a military physician may have information unfamiliar to civilian readers. In these situations, you may want to maintain two versions of your CV: one for internal and another for external use.²

For the benefit of younger colleagues (just about everybody these days), I will share some common pitfalls seen in physician CVs, suggest ways to avoid them, and cite resources that can help you to prepare an effective CV. Caveat lector: what follows is level III evidence of the worst sort.

How, then, can you inadvertently sabotage your CV?

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JOIN A PHANTOM ORGANIZATION

Report that you are a Fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (sic) or the new American Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecology (sic). On second thought, no such organizations exists. The American College (and now Congress) of Obstetricians and Gynecologists is our professional organization. Moreover, to claim membership in nonexistent organizations will puzzle colleagues who know where their dues are going.

REPORT "BOARD ELIGIBILITY"

Happily note that the written examination is behind you, so you are now "Board eligible." On second thought, "Board eligible" is not an approved status with the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Inc. (Or with the American Board of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which does not exist. Or with the American College [or Congress] of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which does not certify physicians.) The correct designation for a physician who has passed the written examination and is awaiting the oral examination is "active candidate."³ This is time-limited. Lack of familiarity with Board procedures and terms may irritate Examiners and others involved with the Board.

CLAIM FOREIGN SERVICE

Report that you are a Diplomat of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Inc. This conjures up glamorous images of overseas diplomacy on behalf of the Board. On second thought, most diplomats work for the State Department in Washington, DC, not the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Inc., in Dallas, Texas. A diplomat is someone who holds a diploma, such as Board certification. A terminal "e" is required.

MIND THE GAP

Leave chronological gaps unexplained in the course of your life. On second thought, this might not be prudent. Because 10% to 12% of physicians have some type of chemical dependency,⁴ any hiatus im-



mediately suggests to gray- or no-haired readers that you were in a drug or alcohol rehabilitation center during that time.

Instead, report your training and experience in reverse chronological order, with your current position at the top. If you have more than a few months unaccounted for since graduation from medical school, explain the gap.¹ For example, “took a year off to care for my dying father in Cleveland” or “spent 6 months trekking through Southeast Asia with my (former) fiancé.” Or “spent 6 months at the Betty Ford Center.”

PAD YOUR PUBLICATIONS

Pepper your publication list with “submitted to,” “in consideration at,” “pending review at,” or “in progress” submissions. On second thought, publication indicates “a published work”⁵ (or in the publication queue after formal acceptance). To list as a publication a manuscript that has not been published or accepted may reflect positive or wishful thinking; more importantly, it is dishonest. Most such submissions do not get published, and this raises troubling questions about misrepresentation.^{6–10} Until a manuscript is accepted by a journal, it cannot appear as a publication on your CV.

If you feel compelled to list submitted manuscripts, then they must go in a different section, not under “publications.” Research projects planned or underway do not belong in your CV.⁸ They are illusory until accepted for publication.

Mix in presentations, lectures, book reviews, and any other academic output under “publications.” On second thought, this goulash is misrepresentation as well. If these are to be included in your CV, they must be segregated into their own sections.⁸ Start with peer-reviewed publications, since these are the coin of the realm in academe. Other publication sections might include non-peer-reviewed publications, abstracts, chapters, books, etc. Presentations cannot be mingled with publications.

Or, better yet, fabricate some publications. Overt fraud in publication lists is widespread,^{6,7,9–12} and the likelihood of getting caught is low.^{9,11} The prevalence of fraud (fictitious articles, bogus journals, or post hoc promotion in the sequence of authorship) has ranged from 3%¹⁰ to 30%⁶ in CVs of physician applicants. On second thought, honesty is fundamental.² Your integrity is like your virginity; you can only lose it once. A short publication list is fine. A dishonest one is not.

RELATE YOUR PREHISTORY

Tell us about your early years: summer camp counselor jobs, biology club, senior prom activities, Boy Scouts, all-state band, and so forth. On second thought, this fluff suggests nervousness about a skinny CV. Activities in college are the earliest to include; prior experiences are generally irrelevant to a medical CV.^{13,14}

PERSONALIZE

Like to knit, scuba dive, read, spend time with your husband, rescue greyhounds, cross dress, jog, bake, sleep, repair umbrellas, play flugelhorn? Fond of ice carving, ice skating, icicles, icebergs, icebreakers, ice cream, ice sitz-baths, Ice Capades, Iceland? Document it all here. On second thought, these are personal (not professional) interests and thus do not belong in your CV.⁸ A CV is a professional document, so this material will be deemed irrelevant, padding, or both.

BRAG A BIT

Mention your inclusion in a prestigious biographical directory, eg, Top Doctors in the Known Universe, Outstanding Obstetricians in the Ozarks, Prominent Physicians in Peoria, Excellent Endocrinologists of Estonian Extraction, etc. On second thought, how were you chosen, and by whom? These flattering announcement letters always include an irresistible offer to buy the expensive directory or a wall plaque commemorating this distinction (viewed by skeptics as one step up from inclusion in the yellow pages).

INVITE IDENTITY THEFT

Post your social security number prominently at the top of your CV. Add your Drug Enforcement Agency controlled substance registration number and state license number as well. On second thought, CVs are often widely circulated. How long will it take some enterprising but unscrupulous reader, armed with your social security number, to open credit card (and other) accounts in your name? What entrepreneur in Nigeria needs your help in moving some money? How many addicts would love access to your magical medical numbers?^{13,15} Instead, just list the states where you have a license¹⁶; readers will assume that you are authorized to prescribe controlled substances.

INVITE COMPANY OVER

Full of parental pride, provide the names of your spouse and children, with their ages, near the top of your CV. For symmetry, include your home address



and phone number beside your office address and phone number. On second thought, some schizophrenic patients, angry former patients, curious current patients, potential stalkers, and occasional picketers might like to know where you and your family live—and what cars you drive. Others will want a prescription at 3:30 AM. Keep your professional and family lives separate.

DESCRIBE YOUR IDEAL JOB

Hopefully, it will be in medicine. On second thought, since you graduated from medical school, readers will likely assume that you would like to be a doctor. If, on the other hand, you would really rather be selling real estate at this point, you may want to keep that to yourself.

FEATURE FUNKY FONTS AND FORMATS

Gussy up your CV to help it stand out from the others. Use large or bold fonts, italics, and sans serif fonts (like Arial or Helvetica), or clip art to attract attention. On second thought, many readers of your CV will be old and conservative.⁸ Cater to your readership. Be conservative as well: use Times New Roman or other serif fonts (with the little feet), 12-point, no italics, and sparing use of underlining. Your CV should stand out because of its content, not its flashy style.

SKIP THE SPELL CHECK

Omit the spell checker software program, and do not pester a colleague to proofread your CV. You are, after all, a college graduate. On second thought, spelling errors, duplicate words or items, and misaligned margins suggest a lack of attention to detail, not a desirable trait in surgeons.^{1,15,17} Use the spell checker to identify and purge all abbreviations; many abbreviations familiar to you will be unknown to others.¹⁵ Have a colleague, friend, or spouse proofread your CV; reading it backward will sometimes discover errors missed in forward reading. Sending out a CV with obvious spelling or grammar errors is akin to going on a blind date with spinach between your front teeth. It does not imply that you are unworthy. . . just sloppy.

SEND YOUR CURRICULUM VITAE AS A WORD DOCUMENT

When your CV is requested, send it electronically as an e-mail attachment: fast and free! On second thought, recipients with Word software (a billion or so) can edit or amend your CV as they wish. Someone might modify your CV for fun or spite then circulate

it without your knowledge. If you cannot take the time and expense to send a fresh version on bond (not photocopy) paper, then take a few minutes to convert your Word document into Adobe portable document format (PDF), which is secure.¹⁵ This is especially important if your CV will be posted on Facebook or on your own Internet web site. Control the content of your CV.

GO GREEN

Rather than waste more paper, use the remaining copies of your last update from two years ago. On second thought, an obsolete CV that still has you listed at your last job may suggest a lack of interest in your own career. Update your CV at regular intervals,¹⁸ date each version at the top, and distribute only the current version. Older versions go in the recycling bin.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Young physicians often feel uneasy or apologetic because their CVs are short. Like a bad hair cut, being young is a self-correcting problem. Time cures both. A crisp, attractive, easily read CV is an important asset. Keep it professional, honest, discreet, and current, and your CV will serve you well.

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