Writing a curriculum vitae

Wednesday, April 10, 2013

A curriculum vitae (CV) is a summary of your background and accomplishments related to your academic and work experience. It's one of many supporting documents you'll need for the residency application process or to apply to research experiences, scholarships, honor societies, and other medical school opportunities.

Creating a CV takes time, but it's a tool physicians use throughout their professional life to present a complete but succinct summary and highlight of their qualifications. It's a living document that represents you. Properly constructed and with periodic updates, the CV you develop now will evolve throughout your career.

The CV and the residency application packet

ERAS transmits your application information to most programs, so you likely won't send a separate CV with your applications. ERAS will also automatically generate a CV for you from your application information, but the format is basic. So it's helpful to prepare a separate CV in advance that's more visually appealing.

Also, most of the information you include on a CV will be required for your residency application, and having it all in one place on a CV will make writing your ERAS application and personal statement easier.

You'll also provide a CV to faculty members who'll write your letters of recommendation. Your school might also request one for preparing your Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE). You'll likely prefer to send the version you created — one that's more aesthetically pleasing and readable.

Components of a CV

When considering information to include in your CV, ask yourself

- Does this particular piece of information help explain who I am and what I've accomplished?
- Will this piece of information encourage residency programs to select me for an interview?
- If I were reading this for the first time and without knowledge of myself as an applicant, would this information be useful?

If you answer no to any of these questions, leave the information out. If you're unsure, consult your advisor or a specialty contact for advice.

The basic categories a CV should contain are listed below. Not all of these elements may be relevant to you, so choose what best applies to your background and experience. Include your contact information and education first, but order the rest to best highlight your skills and qualifications.

Contact information. Provide your formal legal name (no nicknames) and your complete and current contact information. Ensure you can be reached easily at the address(es), e-mail, and phone numbers you list.

Education. List all colleges and universities you've attended for your medical school, graduate, and undergraduate education, with the most recent noted first. Include the name and location of each institution, the degree sought or earned, the date of (expected) completion, and major and minor field of study.

If you opt not to include a section on your CV for honors, include that information here. If you completed a thesis or dissertation as part of a degree program, you may wish to add this distinction along with the title of the paper — particularly if it's relevant to health care or science.

As you move forward in your professional life, you'll add further achievements such as postgraduate training (residencies and fellowships), academic appointments, and certification and licensure.

Honors and awards. Include any awards and scholarships you received during medical school (e.g., election to the Alpha Omega Alpha honor medical society, a biochemistry prize). If you performed well in medical school or on your USMLE exams, list your honors and board scores.

Include only the most important awards and scholarships from undergraduate or other programs. If it makes sense to include numerous items, consider separating this list into subsections: undergraduate and medical school. Especially important in this section is to consider how much each item helps your candidacy and cut any that may not be valued by the reader.

Work experience. List your work experience, with the most recent noted first. List all major or medically related work experiences, including your position title, name of employer, location, and dates of employment.

If you experienced gaps of time in your work history (e.g., time between your undergraduate studies and medical school), include any work experience — medical or non-medical — that accounts for your time out of school.
For medically related work, add a brief description of your responsibilities and achievements as well as the competencies you gained. Be specific, skill-focused, and relevant.

Research. List all your major and medically related research projects, with a sentence or title describing each project. Include the research mentor's name and professional title as well as the location and dates where you completed your research. Include your title (e.g., research assistant, fellow), if applicable.

Extra-curricular and community service activities. List the most important long-term activities and their dates you participated in during medical school, including committee work, community service projects, and student organization involvement. Include your pre-medical school activities only if extraordinary or applicable to health care.

Publications. List all published articles you've authored. If an article has been accepted for publication but not yet published, use the notation "in press" and omit a publication year. Use medical bibliographic reference style and be consistent throughout your CV.

Presentations. List any research, professional, or poster presentations you offered at venues such as conferences, lectures, symposiums, and specialty association meetings. List the title of the presentation, authors, audience, and any other relevant details. This section may be easily combined with publications to create a single, more attractive section.

Professional memberships. List any professional organizations of which you're a member and include any leadership positions you've held. This section may be combined or redefined to include involvement in student organizations.

Hobbies and outside interests. List your outside interests or extracurricular activities. You may be surprised at how often interviewers will ask you about these items. The reason? To keep an interview conversational. So be prepared to discuss any hobby or interest that you include here. This section is optional and should be brief.

Personal information. You can include other personal information such as birth date, marital status, or names and ages of children, but these are optional. Only include them if they'll help your candidacy. For example, if you're applying for residency in the town where your spouse is located or is from, including that information may help establish ties and commitment to a community.

While federal law prohibits employers from discriminating based on age, sex, religion, national origin, and disability status, providing personal information may invite bias. So it's up to you whether you choose to disclose it. You may elect to include it if you feel it's pertinent to your candidacy for the position.

Formatting and production

A CV should feature a clean, distinctive appearance that attracts attention. The final product should be well organized, professional, and easy to read. Here's a good place to start:

- Set margins at 1 inch.
- Choose 11- or 12-point for the size of your fonts.
- Your CV should be as long as you need to convey the relevant information about your qualifications, skills, and experiences. Don't reduce font size, decrease margins, or omit important information to shorten it.
- Limit your font types to one or two similar fonts (one for headings, the other for everything else. Use only conservative, common fonts.
- Ensure consistent style, size, and formatting of headings.
- Use bold, italics, capitalization, and bullets to organize your CV — but use sparingly.
- Spell-check your CV and review it for poor grammar. Ask someone to help you proofread.
- Write short, succinct sentences using active verbs and vivid, precise language.