A physician’s recommendation carries a lot of weight with patients. The same can be said when it comes to fellowship applications.

A 2014 study examining the factors fellowship directors consider when ranking applicants found personal experience with a candidate and the recommendation of a colleague were the top factors in that process. Find out about the other factors that weighed highly.

With summer application deadlines for several subspecialties looming, FREIDA™—a recently revamped comprehensive AMA tool that captures data on more than 11,000 residency and fellowship programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education—offers more than 35 filters to sort programs by location, program type, application information, demographics, benefits, special tracks and more to help applicants find all of the programs available within their desired subspecialty throughout the country.

A recommendation goes a long way

The study was published in JAMA Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery. Fifteen fellowship directors completed surveys on which they were asked to rank a list of 10 qualities from most to least important for judging the strength of a fellowship applicant.

Though pediatric otolaryngology is a narrow subspecialty field—the number of programs accepting applicants is fewer than three dozen—the criteria for ranking fellowship candidates studied was decidedly broad. Program directors surveyed were given a list of 10 potential qualities by which they would rank a candidate in order of priority, with a ranking of one being the most important.
The results are as follows:

- “Personal knowledge and/or recommendation of the applicant” ranked first with an average rating of 1.7 from program directors.
- Interview performance, with an average rating of 2 came in second.
- With an average rating of 3, letters of recommendation came in third.
- Reputation of an applicant’s residency program scored fourth, while related research experiences rounded out the top five.

Other factors that didn’t make the top included an applicant’s score on the United States Medical Licensing Examination, likelihood to rank the program highly, and gender and race.

The study did not offer insight on the factors that contribute to a strong personal recommendation. Even so, it does seem to give fellowship applicants reason to believe that seeking such a personal advocate can be worthwhile.

A difference in applicant perceptions

The study also looked at how applicants viewed the candidate ranking process. Thirty-two candidates who applied for pediatric otolaryngology subspecialty programs and responded to the survey were asked to rank the same factors given to program directors based on how they believed potential fellows should be ranked.

While the lists between how applicants and program directors viewed rankings were similar, there was a divergence at the top. Applicants believed that interview performance should be the most important factor in fellowship selection, with personal knowledge or a colleague’s recommendation of the applicant coming in as the second most important factor. The remaining factors in the top five—letters of recommendation, reputation of residency program and research experiences—were given the same weight by applicants and program directors.

What applicants are looking for

Applicants were also asked which factors they considered most significant in choosing a pediatric otolaryngology fellowship.

Ranking five selections from a list of 14 options, respondents indicated that the top criteria for choosing a program were opportunity based—the chance to get experience in otolaryngology and airway management. Also scoring highly were program location, faculty reputation and the
opportunity for employment after fellowship. The least important factors among the 14 were salary, having a mentor of the same gender and the presence of a fellow clinic.