

# Letters of Reference

## PRINCIPLES

Candor and forthrightness in letters of reference are of the greatest importance in maintaining standards of conduct and of quality among members of the medical profession. Such letters should include that information which the writer or any other prospective employer would wish to receive in order to make a well-informed decision; they should be inclusive rather than selective. The writer must recognize a responsibility to the person about whom the letter is written, to the person to whom it is written, to the institution in which the writer works, to the institution receiving information, and to society at large.

Ethical behavior and character should be addressed in a letter of reference, given that sound behavior and good character are essential to medical practice, teaching and research. On the other hand, letters should avoid unsubstantiated information that could unfairly damage an individual's career.

Although the writer may wish to have assistance regarding a letter's content and style, the ultimate responsibility for the letter resides with the author. If the writer is confused about what to include in a letter of reference, he/she may come to the Office of the Dean where either advice or referral to the University Counsel may be provided, if appropriate.

These principles apply to oral as well as written communications.

## GUIDELINES

1. A faculty member should respond to a request for a letter of reference if he/she has reliable information, whether the information is favorable or unfavorable. A response is required from those in supervisory relationships or department heads.
2. Written responses may be supplemented by oral communications, but the letter should include all major points of concern and be consistent with subsequent oral information.
3. Letters of reference should be addressed to a named individual, not "to whom it may concern."
4. Each letter of reference should begin with a description of the sources of the information and the closeness of the relationship between the letter writer and the person about whom the letter is written. An assessment of the degree of reliability of the information should be included.
5. Hearsay evidence should be evaluated and verified, where possible, before a decision is made about inclusion in a letter of reference. If hearsay evidence cannot be verified, it is essential that the letter identify clearly which evidence is hearsay.
6. The writer of a reference has an obligation to warn, where the case demands, as well as to support.

*Adopted on April 28, 1982.*