

Dear Melanie

I just sent in a recommendation letter for Punit Saraon for a CIHR post-doctoral fellowship. I noticed in the instructions that the freedom of information act stipulates that the candidates have access to our letters of assessment. I have recently acted as a referee for a promotion of somebody to associate professor at a different University. The same thing, they mention that my assessment will be made available to the candidate upon request.

I am not a lawyer but I wanted to post a complaint about this policy in the strongest possible terms. Letters of assessment should be strictly confidential, so that the referees have the freedom to express their views (positive or negative) on the candidates. Under this act, I would be highly careful in providing negative (even if warranted) comments for these individuals if I know that they may have access to the information. Not to say that if my assessment is negative, and lose the opportunity (let it be a fellowship, a job or something like that) my life or the life of my close relatives could be in danger.

By way of this email I declare that I will be negative in providing any assessment on any individual in the future, if the content of my assessment becomes known to the candidate.

In my view it just makes absolutely no sense.

An alternative solution could be that if anybody asks from me (or anybody else) to be their referee, they must sign a declaration waiving their right to see my assessment. This could be a viable option, presented to the candidate any time they request a reference letter.

I hope that you will post this letter in CIHR website for comments and circulate it accordingly. I copy my Chair and my Graduate Studies Coordinator to alert them that this policy is counterproductive and may discourage many qualified referees from providing meaningful recommendation letters. Please feel free to share this opinion with the President of CIHR. It is serious enough to get his attention.

Sincerely,