

## **Top Tips for trainees preparing for exams**

So you are thinking of doing a postgraduate exam?

Postgraduate exams are one of the hurdles you will need to cross in your career and it is worth taking some time to consider how you are going to do this before launching into it. Poor planning can lead to disappointment and low morale as well as a significant dent in your bank balance!

Here are some tips to help you plan your revision and maximise your chance of a successful outcome.

The first thing to consider is that this is likely the first time you are balancing doing exams whilst working as a doctor. Most exams prior to this have been the main focus, however, the exam now has to be slotted into your busy work schedule. It is also likely that you have inherited some additional responsibilities and commitments (family life, other interests). Time is the issue and you need to work out how best to make the most of it.

Time efficient sessions are usually short, sharp, focussed bursts. Set clear plans and goals and write a revision timetable based on the curriculum. Tick each session off as you go to ensure you are on track and covering the breadth of knowledge required. A 40 minute session is often optimal, with a short break before the next. Keep yourself fresh. Your overall revision is the accumulation of many shorter revision sessions so aim to make each one count as best as possible. The end outcome will be significantly better if each session is top quality.

Minimise distractions - social media off and ideally mobile phones etc switched off, or on airplane mode.

Sadly there are no short cuts. You need to cover the breadth of the curriculum and in sufficient detail. Make sure you are familiar with your curriculum and make yourself a revision timetable with some realistic goals.

Book work is essential. You cannot learn the curriculum in sufficient depth by purely doing MCQ questions. Exam technique is an important consideration and doing past questions really helps you practice this, but this should not be done exclusively. You should be looking to cover each topic from reference source first.

The exam is testing your recall of the knowledge so you need to practice this during your revision. Practice questions helps with this, but building frequent testing of yourself into your revision technique is ideal for this. Recall is a lot easier if your revision is organised. There are methods to increase the organisation of your knowledge in your head, such as mind maps, which can be really helpful. They can provide a helpful overview of a topic, onto which you can build depth of detail. Without an order it is really hard to know where to 'look' in your head for the knowledge required. Think about how you can best achieve this with your revision.

You will need at least 3 months of focussed work to give yourself the best chance of success. Consider when the best time is to sit it with regards other commitments inside and outside of work. Discuss this with your educational supervisor and be realistic with your goals. Failed attempts are costly in terms of morale and financially too.

If you have any queries about this it is always good to discuss with your educational supervisor. Peers are also a good source of advice. However, avoid being tempted into just doing past questions. This is 'fool's gold'! It is not a short cut to success and does not help build a solid foundation of knowledge which underpins your clinical practice too. You will hear tales of people 'getting away' with this technique. However, this is not a controlled experiment and there are multiple other factors that will be influencing the outcomes in these cases.