

PSYCHIATRISTS' SUPPORT SERVICE

Information guide
for psychiatrists

On dealing
with exams

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This information guide is intended for trainee psychiatrists who are preparing for their assessments and postgraduate examinations. The information should be used as a guide only and is not a substitute for professional advice. For further information on the MRCPsych examinations and the core competencies, see the College website (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/>) or contact the College's Professional Standards Department, tel: 020 7235 2351 ext 252. If you need further advice and support, please contact the Psychiatrists' Support Service.

Curriculum

The new curriculum for psychiatric training has been designed to ensure that a high standard of training is accomplished using a patient-based and learner-centred approach (Bhugra, 2006). The curriculum (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/training/curriculum.aspx>) defines the competencies, professional behaviour and attitudes which psychiatrists should acquire and demonstrate in their clinical practice.

Workplace-based assessments will take place throughout the 6 years of specialist training and competencies will be rated according to the level of training. Psychiatrists in training must register with the Royal College of Psychiatrists' assessments online (<http://training.rcpsych.ac.uk/>) and complete their mandatory workplace-based assessments. The evidence collected in the workplace-based assessments will form part of the annual review of competence progression (ARCP), at which educational supervisors and College tutors review your training.

MRCPsych examination

The College membership (MRCPsych) examinations comprise three written papers (MRCPsych Paper 1, 2 and 3), each of which is 3-hours long, and will each contain approximately 200 questions. The papers include the 'best answer 1 of 5' format, multiple choice questions and extended matching items. Following the written papers there is a Clinical Assessment of Skills and Competencies (CASC) examination. This is a 16-station examination, testing candidates' competency in clinical skills, appropriate to their stage of training. The examination is split into two sets of eight stations. The first eight stations are linked in pairs; the clinical task in the first station will be linked to a related task in the second station. The second set of eight stations are individual 'stand-alone' stations.

The MRCPsych examinations have been mapped onto the training years. The written papers 1, 2 and 3 can be taken at any time and in any order after a minimum of 12 months post-foundation experience/internship in psychiatry. However, it is recommended that paper 2 should be taken after 18 months and paper 3 after 24 months of post-foundation/internship experience in psychiatry. The CASC examination can be taken after successful completion of Papers 1, 2 and 3 and if you have a minimum of 30 months in post-foundation training in psychiatry.

Further details can be found on the College website (www.rcpsych.ac.uk) and in the document *General Information and Regulations for the MRCPsych Examinations and Assessment Programme 2008* (http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Regulations2008_October%20Amends%20Final%2016%20Oct.pdf). This document also provides information about the workplace-based assessments required at each stage of training.

Trainees are advised to start studying early in their specialist training years and to pace their studies throughout training (Cormac & Marston, 1999).

TIPS

- find the best books/training materials
- find a place to study that is quiet and comfortable
- build on your existing knowledge base and experience
- make notes or Mind Maps® to aid learning and revision
- set aside a regular time to study
- allow time for preparation and breaks from studying
- keep a balance between work and personal life.

Preparation

The following tips may help you go through the assessments and examinations more easily:

- study the curriculum
- plan when you are going to take the examinations (take account of your personal circumstances, for example a new baby)
- seek advice from those who have already passed the exam
- create your own study programme
- plan your application for study leave/revision courses
- form a study group with others who are also preparing for the exam
- practise scenarios for the CASC.

Study skills or techniques

Postgraduate examinations require a significantly greater depth and breadth of knowledge than undergraduate examinations. There is no escape from having to learn vast amounts of information in order to pass the MRCPsych examination. It is important to reinforce memory by revising and by practising recall. Clinical scenarios are useful especially for the CASC.

Belonging to a study group may help you reduce your workload of finding information and enable you to share experience and provide support to each other. Study groups also aid reflection on progress.

It is important to discuss learning and your progress with your educational supervisor. If you lack experience or would benefit from more training in a particular area, make sure these educational needs are addressed.

Practice

Core competencies are the basis of the new format for training so it is important to use every opportunity to learn and practise clinical skills. Practise a variety of scenarios to prepare for the workplace-based assessments. Other mental health professionals will be involved in these assessments and trainees will need skills in teamworking.

TIPS

- find out what is required at your level of training
- do not get downhearted if you do not achieve high marks in the early stages of training, your marks should improve during training
- plan your workplace-based assessments at the beginning of each post and relate this to your learning objectives
- keep the necessary paperwork to hand
- keep a record of workplace-based assessments
- obtain feedback and take steps to improve your performance.

Theory

The core curriculum has sections which must be covered. One strategy is to skim all sections and then return to studying specific topics in depth. Another strategy is to methodically study each section in turn before moving to the next.

Stress management

Although the time frame for training has been set, trainees will inevitably face setbacks and sometimes fail to pass assessments or examinations on time. This can create pressure, lead to stress and disruption of training.

TIPS

- identify your support network of family and friends
- develop coping strategies to deal with anxiety
- avoid using stimulants.

Administration

Ensure that you apply to take the examinations in plenty of time, as forms must be completed and returned to the College. Try not to get too tired in the process of revising. On the examination day, make sure that you arrive at the examination venue in plenty of time.

If you are not successful

There may be various reasons why you were not successful and it is important to find out why it happened so you can address the issues. Feedback from the College's Professional Standards Department will be sent to you. It is also advisable to seek advice from your College tutor and your educational supervisor – listen carefully to their suggestions and make notes so that you can look over them later. If you have failed a particular part of the examination, ensure that this area is an identified learning need. While you focus on this area, continue to revise the other sections of the curriculum, with a range of consultants, from the 'hawks' to the 'doves'. This should help you to regain your confidence. Changes may be needed in your attitude, knowledge base or skills, and you may need to widen your clinical experience.

Sources of further help and support

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Professional Standards Department
17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG
Tel: 0207 235 2351 ext 252
<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/training/examinations.aspx>

Psychiatrists' Support Service

Royal College of Psychiatrists
17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG
Tel: 020 7245 0412
Email: psychiatristssupportservice@rcpsych.ac.uk

Further reading

BHUGRA, D., MALIK, A. & BROWN, N. (2007) *Workplace-Based Assessments in Psychiatry*. Gaskell.

References

- BHUGRA, D. (2006) The new curriculum for psychiatric training (editorial). *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, **12**, 393–396.
- CORMAC, I. & MARSTON, G. (1999) How to pass the MRCPsych examination. *Psychiatric Bulletin*, **23**, 172–176.