

MRCP clinical exam in Malta

Stephen Montefort

The Membership of the Royal College of Physicians of the United Kingdom (MRCP UK) is awarded to trainees in Medicine near the end of their Basic Specialist training, following a rigorous exam. This is a major stepping-stone to Higher Specialist training which is remembered by most internal medicine physicians practicing in Malta, and indeed elsewhere around the world since the MRCP diploma is considered very prestigious and carries significant weight towards advancing ones medical career. All these physicians also remember the trials and tribulations both financial and psychological, that they experienced until they finally completed this milestone. This difficult exam is compounded by the fact that one also had to travel to one of various UK centres in the past, making this endeavor even more arduous. Since 2008, to the great benefit of local candidates, the written parts of this exam have been carried out biennially at the Malta Medical School since this was just a matter of organizing a venue, invigilation and secure delivery of papers to and from the UK. Organising the clinical part of the exam, the Practical Assessment of Clinical Examination Skills (PACES), was a completely different and much more challenging task, but one which I set myself as a major goal since becoming the Academic Head of the Department of Medicine in October 2012. PACES is the largest international postgraduate clinical skills assessment in the world with almost 5000 candidates sitting the exam per year.

After securing the support of the Dean and the Executive Administrator of the Medical School, together with the Mater Dei Hospital CEO, contact was made with the examination department of the Royal College of Physicians in August 2013, regarding about the possibility of Malta becoming one of international centres organizing PACES. The reception was very enthusiastic but slow. It was only in March 2015 that Professor Andrew Elder, the then newly appointed Chair of the Clinical Examining Board for the MRCP(UK) PACES examination and Dr. Donald Farquhar, the MRCP assistant International director, visited our medical school to see for themselves whether the Malta

Medical School could become a PACES international centre. Meetings were held with the Dean, the organizing committee, prospective examiners, medical school and hospital administrators. The venue in the laboratory section of the Faculty of Health Sciences was also inspected. The delegation also met Mr. Chris Fearn, the then Parliamentary Secretary for Health who also promised his support toward the organization of this exam. The College delegation was satisfied and it was decided that we should go ahead with our plans for hosting this exam. The most contentious issue was whether local candidates would be allowed to sit for their PACES exam in Malta since the great majority practice in the same hospital where the exam would be carried out. After discussing various pros and cons, it was decided that sufficient measures could be put in place so that these candidates could be examined in a fair and proper manner. It was thus decided that at each session, ten places will be 'ring-fenced' for Maltese candidates. It was also agreed that when these local candidates sat for the exam, they would always be examined by UK examiners, and if paired with a local examiner, the UK examiner would lead during that encounter.

A 'mock' Pathfinder PACES exam was held on the 17th October 2015 in which 15 prospective Maltese candidates sat for the exam. They were examined by 6 visiting UK examiners and the 3 established Maltese PACES examiners who had previously examined in UK centres. Five trainee Maltese examiners received their training during this session and they were all deemed to have attained the required standard to examine candidates in future sessions of PACES, both locally and in the UK.

The first formal session took place at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Mater Dei Hospital between the 1st and 3rd April 2016 where 44 doctors, including 6 Maltese doctors sat for the exam. The rest of the candidates were from Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Six more Maltese examiners also received their training during this 3 day session and were also formally

recruited as PACES examiners. The feedback from the Chairman of the examining board, examiners and even some of the visiting candidates was very favourable regarding venue, choice of patients and surrogates, as well as the actual running of the examination process. This has encouraged us immensely and we look forward to hosting the exam in future. Indeed, the next PACES exam is slated for December 2016, and it is envisaged that this exam will be held locally twice a year.

Attaining the status of an international centre for the PACES exam for the Malta Medical school has not only meant that we have been deemed to be of the required high standard to organize such a prestigious examination, but it is also of great help to our local budding physicians to be able to sit for such an important exam in familiar surroundings without having to leave our shores.

Cover Picture:

‘Atlantic Waves’ (inspiration from B. Alexander)

Oil on canvas

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