

Short report: Preparing for simulated office orals

Survey of practices in 16 family medicine departments

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Simulated office orals (SOOs) are the oral component of the College of Family Physicians of Canada's (CFPC) Certification Examination in Family Medicine. Each SOO consists of a 15-minute interview between a "patient" (actor) and "physician" (resident or non-board-certified physician); emphasis is on evaluation of candidates' use of patient-centred and communication skills.

In their efforts to prepare residents for certification, Canadian university departments of family medicine engage in numerous educational activities. A literature search failed, however, to discover any curriculums designed to prepare residents for SOOs. Motivated by a belief that to prepare for a SOO is to prepare for practice, we designed a survey to identify activities departments associate with preparation for SOOs and to subsequently evaluate and document similarities and differences in practices in the various departments.

METHOD

Our interest was with the SOO examination itself; therefore, a literature search using the

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MEDLINE and ERIC databases from 1966 to 2000 was restricted to the headings "oral examinations" and "simulated office orals." The search produced 48 abstracts; however, they contained few recommendations on the activities departments can incorporate into their programs to prepare family medicine residents for SOOs.¹⁻⁷ We anticipated that our survey would capture the current state of training in the 16 Canadian departments and that we could then disseminate this information to academic colleagues and community physicians involved in teaching residents.

Over the course of several months, faculty at the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Family Medicine designed a 47-item questionnaire with four categories: structure, acting, teaching, and evaluation. Telephone, e-mail, and fax contact resulted in a 100% response rate (all 16 departments). Completed surveys were scrutinized for commonalities, disparities, emerging themes, and interesting points. As surveys were returned, we recognized that "SOO preparation activity" was interpreted by programs to include two streams of education: anything associated with preparing residents for SOOs as they occur during the Certification Examination, and everything else that contributes to development of physician-patient communication skills and patient-centred expertise. When we interpreted the data, SOO preparation activity included both streams.

RESULTS

Structure, the first category of training activity, focuses directly on preparing residents for the Certification Examination in terms of its structure, content, and expectations. To this end, six departments conduct a SOO orientation and two a seminar on examination tips. All but one department provide residents with structured

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SOO practice runs: an average of three (range, one to four) for first-year residents and four (range, one to seven) for second-year residents. Participation is mandatory in 14 departments.

Fifteen departments schedule a block of SOO practice sessions 2 to 4 months before the Certification Examination and use CFPC-generated SOO scenarios for practice. Seven create their own scenarios, and seven use the same practice scenario for both first- and second-year residents. Although all departments provide residents with feedback on SOO performance using the CFPC's SOO marking scheme to guide the dialogue, only seven formalize the comments with a numerical score.

The second category of training involves activities identified by departments as integral to residents' education in general and to SOO preparation in particular. To this end, six conduct behavioural science seminars with instruction in the patient-centred clinical method, three employ role play, four use case and video review, and three engage in direct observation.

DISCUSSION

All departments help residents prepare for SOOs. Although substantial resources are devoted to this activity, very little literature describes recommended training curriculums or evaluates processes used to prepare residents for this portion of the Certification Examination. Numerous respondents indicated that the range of variables contributing to success on the examination defy the ability to draw transferable conclusions.

Three main themes emerged from the survey: all departments use practice SOOs as part of preparation for the Certification Examination; both the frequency and evaluation of these SOOs vary; and SOO practice runs are only one component of preparation. Despite variation among departments, 14 expressed satisfaction with their preparation practices and did not plan any changes in the foreseeable future. Any attempt to standardize preparation met with disfavor.

CONCLUSION

All departments engage in an extensive array of activities that collectively increase residents' likelihood of success on the SOO portion of the Certification Examination. Similarities in the training activities endorsed by departments are apparent; SOO practice sessions are prominent on the list. We recommend that the CFPC generate and distribute more practice

Editor's key points

- Responses to a questionnaire completed in the 16 Canadian departments of family medicine described how residents prepared for their simulated office oral (SOO) examinations, a component of the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Certification Examination in Family Medicine.
- All but one department organized training runs for the SOOs. Eight departments had preparatory activities or seminars specifically on SOOs. Other activities included workshops, role playing, direct observation, case reviews, and videotaping.
- These preparatory activities were judged satisfactory in 14 departments of family medicine, all of whom did not want training activities to be standardized.

Points de repère du rédacteur

- Un questionnaire complété dans les 16 facultés de médecine canadiennes a permis de décrire la préparation des résidents pour les entrevues médicales simulées (EMS) qui sont une composante de l'examen de certification en médecine familiale.
- Quinze départements de médecine familiale organisent des évaluations formatives à l'aide d'EMS. De plus, huit départements organisent des activités préparatoires ou des séminaires portant spécifiquement sur les EMS. Les autres activités préparatoires sont des séminaires, des jeux de rôle, l'observation directe et la révision de cas ou d'enregistrement vidéo.
- Ces activités préparatoires sont jugées satisfaisantes dans 14 départements de médecine familiale qui ne souhaitent pas que ces activités soient standardisées dans les différents milieux d'enseignement.

scenarios to departments for the purpose of preparing residents for SOOs. 

Author contributions

Ms Greenberg was responsible for the literature review, survey concept, and data acquisition and collation. She drafted the manuscript and was involved in survey design and data analysis. **Dr Bradel** contributed to survey design, data analysis and interpretation, and manuscript preparation. **Dr Ganshorn** was involved in survey design, data analysis, and manuscript review. **Dr Mahood** took part in survey design, data analysis and interpretation, and manuscript revision. **Dr Zagowski** helped with

survey design and data analysis. **Dr Lawrence** was involved in survey design, data analysis, and manuscript revision.

Competing interests

None declared

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