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Swot teams

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Exam preparation is never easy, but it's even harder if you're out bush. *Jacquie van Santen* looks at how rural registrars are cleverly adapting.

FACE-to-face study groups and peer-based learning situations are a great way to prepare for exams, but may be out of the question when registrars are miles from the next town – or the next registrar.

This tyranny of distance is something rural registrars face, but they are increasingly finding that lateral thinking, the latest in technology and good resources can help overcome obstacles when studying for the RACGP exam.

Professor John Fraser, director of the Hunter New England Area Rural Training Unit, has worked as a senior medical educator for seven years and says that, in many ways, rural registrars are at an advantage when preparing for the exam.

"The variety of conditions registrars manage in rural practice and district hospitals means that a lot of the exam content can actually be covered at work," he says.

"For example, scenarios will often ask about what to expect if the case involves hospitalisation or emergency care, and this is often part of the day-to-day work of GP registrars in rural areas," Professor Fraser says.

On the flip side, some GP roles are performed less often in rural practice. Dr Rod Martin, a registrar in outback Theodore, Queensland, and a representative for the Remote Vocational Training Stream (RVTS) program, has lived with this dilemma.

Dr Martin says one of the key disadvantages for rural registrars is many of the routine cases city registrars see are not common in remote – and especially Aboriginal – communities.

"While the breadth of presentations RVTS registrars see is often greater, these topics are rarely covered in the current exam," he says.

Dr Martin advises his rural colleagues to get around this by "learning" some of the common metropolitan presentations.

"The good thing is that rural registrars are typically self-directed and can prepare themselves, or are prepared by their work and communities."

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Making use of local resources is another way to overcome the limitations of experience in rural practice, according to Professor Fraser. He suggests rural registrars consider visiting their community health centre, "so you know the services available where you work".

"Do a few home visits and nursing home visits close to the exam to consider the differences [involved in] managing the same patient in a hospital [emergency department] or at home.

"Ask yourself: Have I covered most of the curriculum with my practice patients? For example,

some rural practices may have less exposure to migrant health but have more encounters in Aboriginal health.”

Getting started

- Be prepared well ahead of time – 12 months ideally.
- Do mock papers. In fact, do all of the questions that you can lay your hands on – general practice or other.
- Check with your local division or ACRRM to see if they have any exam preparation workshops in the pipeline.
- Learn from your patients first then practise questions that prepare you for the test.
- Videotape consultations and review them with your supervisor or medical educator.
- Practise role-plays and time management.

Advice provided by Dr Bruce Chater, Professor John Fraser and Dr Rod Martin.

A log of patients is another useful method that can be cross-checked against texts and used by registrars to reflect on the approach they take to different presentations.

“This will assist to reinforce a framework where common conditions are competently managed and ‘red flags’ are found,” Professor Fraser says.

A virtual training consortium can also assist in exam preparation, he believes.

“You can link up with colleagues via teleconferencing, where distance prohibits a face-to-face meeting. If you are feeling isolated, be proactive: ask your training consortium for support and to arrange mock exams,” he says.

Professor Fraser believes role-plays – which could be done with supervisors or other doctors – are an ideal way to practise for the writtens and vivas.

“Don’t underestimate the value of role-playing with nurses or other health professionals, especially in managing difficult patients.”

Top tips from the RACGP

- Don’t rush into the exam. Give yourself time and look at everything going on in your life.
- Study the pre-exam video developed by the RACGP’s national rural faculty.
- Talk to the exam panel chair in your state to find out if there are other registrars in your area to form a study group. This can be a virtual study group via email or through teleconferencing.
- Check if the RACGP runs pre-exam courses in your area.
- Use the expertise from your training provider to find out what has been successful for other registrars.

Tips provided by Dr Tim Mooney, RACGP censor for the national rural faculty, and a GP based in George Town, Tasmania.

Dr Bruce Chater, president of the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM), says the RVTS has shown that registrars can do well in isolation with the help of regular support, teleconferences and other get-togethers.

Dr Chater gives his registrar the chance to do courses and take responsibility, to help preparation.

“I find time for him to go away to courses and to teach elements of what he has learnt to staff when he returns. I also take him to local CME events and videotape or sit in on consultations – both his and mine.”

Dr Chater says active learning is good exam preparation. “Make the most of the courses available and get involved in local educational activities. Don’t just limit your learning to the

exam, and identify your deficiencies using the Primary Curriculum.”

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