



Overseas trained doctors

How to prepare for a fellowship exam

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Exam preparation is a stressful time and everyone wants to prepare effectively to do as well as they can. It is a personal challenge that, successfully overcome, carries the reward of peer recognition and acceptance. However, for the overseas trained doctor it is not easy to write a fellowship exam when one is not sure either where or how to start, where to get help and resources, and how to proceed. I encountered many difficulties in preparing for the Fellowship of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (FRACGP) exam, and in overcoming these difficulties, thought the knowledge acquired may be useful to others facing the same task.

The overseas trained doctor will have started in general practice in Australia with approval from the Medical Board. Within Australia, both the spectrum and profile of general practice may differ from where you practised. General practice is a wide field of medicine and you may feel frustrated that there is no set curriculum to indicate more precisely the field open to an examination.

As you organise yourself to prepare to sit the exam, first assess your curriculum vitae and review your overseas general practice experiences as required by the RACGP. Assessment takes a few months and the RACGP's feedback will advise when you are eligible to sit for the exam. The lead time thus calculated should then be programmed to organise yourself for systematic study. The sooner you start preparing for the exam, the better.

The exam will focus on current Australian general practice. For this task, a broad span of knowledge will be more useful than greater depth in only a few areas. The philosophy to adopt is pragmatic – rather like the way one survives in general practice. The exam covers the five domains of general practice and seeks professional knowledge of:

- communication skills and the patient-doctor relationship
- applied professional knowledge and skills

- population health and the context of general practice
- professional and ethical role, and
- organisational and legal dimensions.

(A description of the five domains can be found at the RACGP website: www.racgp.org.au).

The exam components

The exam consists of three parts – two written and one clinical:

Applied knowledge test (AKT): a two item type test of single best answer and extended matching questions (MCQs) – you can download examples from the RACGP website.

Key feature problems (KFP): consists of a clinical case scenario followed by questions relating to the key feature of the case. This may be a list of the most likely diagnoses or what initial investigation you would perform, or a choice of options for the most appropriate management.

The clinical exam: run along the lines of an 'OSCE'. This component of the exam represents a session in general practice. The exam takes 3.5 hours and covers 16–18 stations and includes a couple of rest stops. Each station takes 11–19 minutes to complete, depending on whether it is a short or long clinical case. There are stations that involve simulated consultations with examiners acting as patients, physical examination of patients, practical procedures,

and viva style discussions with the examiner.

Study plan

It was my experience that a study plan was difficult to start, but once started the path revealed through planning led directly to my goal. Start with a good background knowledge of general practice (I needed to add knowledge of salient differences in Australian general practice). I found it useful to spend time in identifying not only my strengths and weaknesses, but also identifying 'extra' knowledge not usually seen in everyday general practice. I also found it helpful to study the exam matrix in order to see what emphasis should be given to each topic.

From a review of my everyday experiences when consulting, I would spend time considering if there were any of my patient's needs which fell within my area of responsibility that I was unable to meet. You will find the results of these reflections will help determine your learning needs and direct you to books, journals, websites, and of course, one's colleagues for answers (see *Resources*). My advice is to make short notes on what you read, so that you can review them closer to exam time.

Revision plan

Revision often brings back thoughts of spend-

ing time writing lists as aids to memory. Realistically, one is well advised to start revising at least 3 months before the exam. You can expect to be examined on anything that may 'turn up' in general practice, therefore it is wise to revise the topics you may be a bit 'hazy' on. A suggested revision plan is shown in *Table 1*.

Study group

Join a study group. The importance of group work can't be overstated. You can share the workload as a group, set and allocate listed tasks and prepare summaries of relevant articles to discuss in-group. For each session prepare a 'clinical challenge' from *Australian Family Physician*. Go through the answers with the group. Discussions are good for oral examination. You can start an email study group to discuss cases when it is not possible to meet. Your local division of general practice or rural workforce agency can give you a list of doctors planning to do the exam. The most useful thing to do with others to prepare for the clinical exam is to set up practice cases for physical examination and to time the session. It allows you to understand the quality of your clinical skills. There are no alternatives to practice – practise, practise, practise!

Pre-exam workshop

This is a weekend course organised by the RACGP a couple of months before the written exam. It gives you an insight into the exam and helps to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. You will meet other candidates and share thoughts, ideas and resources. Such courses can introduce you to an ideal study group.

Important extra tips

- Keep some time for your family – do not forget them
- Let your practice know early that you are doing the exam and if you will need time off work to study
- Ask around – you might find local GPs who are Fellowship examiners and could offer help and advice
- Don't leave your exam revision to the last moment – develop a plan for revision

Table 1. Revision plan

Topic	Know nothing	Moderate	Good	Reading covered
Hypertension				
Cholesterol				
HRT and OCT				
Depression				
Osteoporosis				
Common condition (eg. sore throat)				
Rheumatology				
Skin disorder				
Palliative care				
Sexual abuse				
Alcohol/drugs				
HIV/AIDS				
Men's health				
Obstetric care				
Aboriginal health				
Screening				
Counselling				
Doctor-patient relationship				
Complaints/ethics				
Practice management				
Sick doctor				
Looking after self				

- Exams usually test more than memory: you will be expected to demonstrate understanding and to apply knowledge
- Relax! Have faith in yourself and reflect upon your work knowledge and experiences. You will gain confidence for both the exam and your daily practice.

Good luck!

Resources

Journals

Australian Family Physician, Medicine Today: read the editorials and articles on topics related to general practice for the past 2–3 years. It is helpful to read *AFP's* 'clinical challenge' and 'brain teaser' quizzes.
Australian Doctor, Medical Observer: look at the current affairs and pull out the clinical sections. Visit their websites for previous issues.

CDs and publications

The RACGP check program is a great support. It is published according to topics, is brief, direct, and easy to read. Indeed, I would go so far as to say they are essential reading. Go through 4–5 years of programs. Peruse the covers for all domains of general practice and quick question and answer MCQs.
Murtagh's General practice: essential reading covering many relevant topics to everyday practice
Fitzpatrick's Colour atlas and synopsis of clinical dermatology: a handy combination of both text and articulated images
Talley, O'Connor and McRae's *Clinical orthopaedic*

examination

Hutchinson's *Clinical medicine*

Roger Neighbor's *The inner consultation*

The RACGP's *Standards for general practice*, 2nd edn

The RACGP's *Putting prevention into practice*

The RACGP's *Guidelines for preventive activities in general practice*, 5th edn

The RACGP's *Sterilisation/disinfection guidelines for general practice*, 3rd edn.

Videos (from the RACGP library)

Clinical procedure and physical examination techniques: a useful resource for the clinical component of the exam

Evening tutorial series from the RACGP NSW Faculty: relevant to the clinical component of the exam

Cases in General Practice Program 1–9: recommended for the written component of the exam.

Websites

www.racgp.org.au – register on-line, search the library catalogue and obtain your choices including exam resources – free to RACGP members

www.dermnet.org.nz/www.dermis.net – 100s of images of dermatological conditions as well patient information and management sections

www.gpea.com.au – a comprehensive list of useful information to help you prepare for the exam. GPEA offers courses and workshops for the exam

www.globalfamilydoctor.com and www.emedicine.com – case studies and MCQs.

Conflict of interest: none.

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