



An Introduction to the Mock Boards for Incoming Residents

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As I finish the first year of my residency, I can proudly say that I survived the transition to dermatology, the extra workload required of first-year residents, and of course the first “mock boards” examination. Regardless of how I feel about my score on the test, I am happy to have completed it, and I am confident that I have a firm grasp of what to expect next year. Moreover, I have a better sense of what I should (and should not) be studying, what sources to use, and what study methods to employ to focus my preparations. Accordingly, the purpose of this column is to suggest study habits and resources for the incoming dermatology residents that might make preparing for this daunting examination more manageable. Furthermore, I will comment on the controversy surrounding the use of “airplane notes” and will discuss alternative study options that are available for the certifying examination, which will be here for all of us before we know it.

Preparing for the Mock Boards

For those who do not know, and I suspect many incoming residents do not, the dermatology in-training examination (also known as the mock boards) is a yearly computerized test that consists of more than 200 questions pertaining to all aspects of dermatology. The examination is in multiple-choice format, testing one’s knowledge of general medical dermatology, basic science, dermatopathology, and surgery using the types of questions that could appear on the certifying examination. The test is administered in February of each year and takes approximately 4 hours to complete. Notably, your test score does not officially count, but the examination is designed to identify your overall knowledge-based

strengths and weaknesses.¹ Your scores also are followed by program directors and chairmen to monitor resident study habits.

As the mock boards approaches, it may be tempting to try and review all of your textbooks and lecture notes, which may include exhaustive reviews of genodermatoses, dermatopathology, digitized and original Kodachrome slides, and pharmacology, among other subjects. Although these materials provide a comprehensive overview of testable material, it is not practical to review it all prior to the examination. Instead, I found it helpful this year to focus on the Dermatology In-Review study guide binder (sponsored by Galderma Laboratories, LP). The binder is similar to the *First Aid* series of books for steps 1 through 3 and provides a concise high-yield review of many topics from basic science to cosmetic surgery. Best of all, it is provided free of charge to all residents across the country. Although the review is concise, the binder is thick (>600 pages), making it necessary to start reviewing the study guide at least 4 to 6 weeks prior to the mock boards. Online study tools also accompany the binder, including a large collection of multiple-choice questions to reinforce important subjects and break up the tedious task of reading the binder (www.dermatologyinreview.com). The Web site continues to evolve and be upgraded; it also offers online flashcards, Kodachromes, dermatopathology images, practice examinations, and PowerPoint presentations.

These resources are great for focused preparation in the weeks leading up to the examination, but it is important not to cram and to stay on top of the textbook readings, day-to-day lectures, teaching sessions, and major dermatology journals throughout your first year and beyond. It may be helpful to use multiple sources and to read about different diseases in different formats, to study with fellow residents as a group, or to place certain conditions in some sort of context related to an interesting patient you have seen. Overall, in many ways boards preparation

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is a year-round activity, and a slow and steady approach is ideal for minimizing the need for last-minute cramming.

Airplane Notes and the Certifying Examination

Part of my motivation for writing this column is a result of the controversy surrounding the use of airplane notes or “recall notes,” which has been widely discussed in the media and has brought new attention to preparation for the certifying examination. Regardless of how you feel about their use, ethicality, or even their accuracy, the American Board of Dermatology firmly discourages the use of airplane notes,² and I believe residents should distance themselves from using them. However, I do understand some of the arguments offered by the radiology community that justify the use of recall notes, including their usefulness as a resource for improving one’s general medical knowledge and as a rough study guide for more focused preparation.^{3,4} Other arguments challenge the nature of the radiology examination itself, citing the “obscure” and “irrelevant” questions that add to the difficulty of the test, ultimately promoting the use of such resources in a field in which board certification is a must.⁴ Regardless of your position, the controversy has forced many residents to reconsider their use of such materials and to turn to more permissible options.

Some alternative resources for graduating residents who are preparing for the certifying examination could include a number of review courses offered around the country. These include a general dermatology and dermatopathology board review course typically held each year over 4 days in May in Tampa, Florida. The course offers a comprehensive review of high-yield general dermatology and dermatopathology topics and includes more than 200 glass slides for review. Another review course is held in Covington, Kentucky, over 3 days in June, focusing solely on dermatopathology slide review. Additionally, there

is a slide seminar in Rosemont, Illinois, that is held over 3 days at the end of June and concentrates on Kodachromes. Although these review courses are adequate resources for strengthening areas of weakness, the classes are expensive and tuition can range from \$400 to \$700 or more, excluding travel and hotel expenses. Considering the astronomical cost of the certifying examination alone, these review courses may not be for everyone but could be considered as a supplemental resource.

Final Thoughts

Hopefully this column has provided a starting point for incoming first-year dermatology residents who feel as clueless as I once did about preparing for the mock boards. For rising residents, many of these suggestions are intuitive and you may already be familiar with the study guides, but I hope this information introduces new resources to consider or encourages you to reevaluate your own study methods.

What are your thoughts on board preparation, and what study resources do you think are valuable?

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