

How I failed PACES – a UK trainee’s perspective

Preparation first time

I was a first year Core Medical Trainee at the time, working in a busy emergency department. It was very demanding, relentless in fact. I’d be in at 7 am and often not finished until 7 – 8 pm, working constantly in between. They say you need a good few months’ solid revision to have any chance of passing PACES. I started preparing in time, and used the time I had as best I could. Books got me through Parts 1 and 2, so why not again? I had a few friends taking PACES, but they were working in different parts of the hospital and they had more time to see patients during the day. Who’d want to stick around at night until I finished and then start PACES practice?! I examined people on the medical take all the time anyway, and I spent time with the consultants on their rounds too. The lead consultant knew I was doing PACES, but there wasn’t any focused teaching for it, he was just too busy. I would get home after a busy day at work and hit the books over dinner, and afterwards. It was exhausting!

First attempt

All of a sudden exam day was here. I drove to the hospital. It was not one I’d been to before, but I followed the signs and found the outpatient department. I sat in the reception area along with the other candidates doing the paperwork. We were all in it together, sweaty bags of nerves, but few dared to speak. For my part I was running through exam routines over and over in my head. I’d done the reading, so once I found something I’d hopefully be able to tell them a bit about it. It felt like a couple of hours, but eventually an administrator collected us and showed me to my first station. There was a piece of paper, my first scenario, and through the door I glimpsed an examiner chatting to a patient. The first bell went and I frantically picked up the instructions. Luckily there wasn’t much to read because I know from experience that for the first few minutes of an exam I’m useless with nerves. The exam was a whirlwind and I was exhausted at the end; physically and mentally broken. It was going to be touch and go. I knew I’d messed up the abdominal station; there just seemed to be masses everywhere, and my differential diagnosis was farcical looking back on it. Station 5 threw me too; I just couldn’t find anything wrong!

Results

I rotated to start working in general practice shortly after the exam and checked the MRCP(UK) website incessantly for results, almost between every patient. Click, click, no not up yet. Then one day, click, click, FAIL. Oh no, what will my friends think? What will my parents think? I had never failed an exam in my life before. Clearly, when the pressure is on and there’s a real, practical test of how good a doctor you are I wasn’t up to the mark. I doubted myself for a long time after that. I didn’t tell anyone either. I hadn’t told many people I was sitting PACES. I did the same thing with my driving test too – I suppose it’s a defence mechanism. I didn’t feel my educational supervisor was very involved. He knew I was doing the exam, but hadn’t asked about it. I kept it to myself and continued working away. Of course I was going to try again though. And again and again if necessary, but I was convinced everyone else was a better doctor than me. All my friends seemed to sail through and here’s me getting held back by something that surely should just be a formality?

Preparation second time round

Looking back on it I only saw the ones who passed and ignored those who were in the same situation as me. Selective blindness I suppose. I don’t feel the same way about my ability now, by the way. Actually, failing the exam was almost a good thing. After a few weeks of feeling sorry for myself, I picked myself up. I worked hard at picking up physical signs, which was what I’d failed on. I went and found my supervisor and told him I’d failed. I found out which consultants in my hospital were PACES examiners and knocked on their doors. They weren’t gnarled ogres like I’d imagined. These people are the ones who give up their time, free of charge, to help educate us, so in fact if anything they tend to be the nicest consultants in the hospital! Three of them offered to take me round patients regularly. I also chatted to registrars who’d passed PACES

recently and found them only too keen to teach. I formed a group with other trainees sitting in the upcoming diet, which meant we could assess each other and share our patients and contacts. I complemented that with book work, but this time I focused on picking up signs and what to do with them once I'd found them. I chatted to the head of my department who was very understanding and let me spend half an hour or so in the middle of the day examining patients with the others.

Second attempt

Exam day came around quickly again. This time it was a different hospital, but somehow it looked almost exactly the same. I had the same sweaty, nervous feeling too. Surely I'd mess up again. The bell went, I picked up and tried to read the first scenario, here we go again. This time though the exam flowed more smoothly. The questioning by the examiner seemed like less of an interrogation and more of a conversation. I was confident in what I'd found and I knew how to structure my answer because I'd practiced it with my friends. At the end I still wasn't sure about the result, but I felt a lot better about my performance. If I didn't get it this time I was sure I was heading in the right direction. Eventually I'd get there.

Results and reflections

Back at work I still checked the website incessantly, until one day, click, click, PASS! Success! I was so pleased.

At the end of the day PACES hasn't just been an exam, a tick in a box or a bar to jump over before specialist training. For me it has been such an important formative stage in my career. It has definitely made me a better doctor. I'm more rounded, confident in my examination, thoughtful in my diagnosis, clearer in my communication. It changed the way I prepared for my Specialty Certificate Examination too and I passed that first time, even though a lot of my friends failed.

Maybe failing PACES the first time wasn't so bad after all.