10 STEPS TO OSCE SUCCESS

How to prepare for your practical skills exams

BMA



Nervous about your OSCEs?

Your Objective Structured Clinical Exams are designed to test your practical and communication skills in key general practice and clinical procedures. They can seem complicated and even intimidating, but with these 10 tips for success in your back pocket, you'll practice your skills like a pro and feel confident at every exam.

STEP 1



Be brave in your practice habits

Your OSCEs will test a range of skills and knowledge, from visual acuity to how you interpret x-rays. You don't want to get stuck practicing only the skills you feel most comfortable with. Before you begin to review and study, take a moment to identify your weaknesses in each of the OSCE topics then target those until you reach a confident level of proficiency.

STEP 2



Join a practice group

Practicing OSCE skills with peers is a great way to identify those areas where you need improve. Organise group sessions in line with the current COVID restrictions or set up a weekly Zoom session. Make the best use of the time by asking for constructive feedback and giving it in return, to help each other avoid repeating the same mistakes.

STEP 3



Use non-medic ‘patients’

To practice interpreting and communicating data and procedures, it’s important to find willing participants who are not in the medical profession. Family members, friends and flatmates all make for great ‘patients’ who will give you honest answers as a real patient would, as well as valuable feedback on your overall manner and performance.

STEP 4



Practice under pressure

The OSCEs will test how you perform under pressure, and you want to feel confident completing tasks quickly. Try practicing your skills within a set period of time. It's good practice to test your skills within a 5-minute timeframe or less, as some OSCE stations will have a few straightforward questions to answer at the end.

STEP 5



Review the DOCS

DOCS (Directly Observed Clinical Skill) forms are used in the OSCEs to mark your performance in general practice or clinical and provide feedback. Use these same DOCS in your practice sessions to help you track and check off that you're feeling confident in essential examination skills. DOCS forms can be found on the QUB Med Portal under "clinical skills".

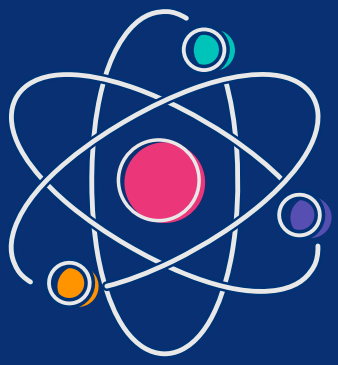
STEP 6



Get your beauty sleep

On the night before the exam, the best thing you can do is get a full night's rest. You're more likely to be able to concentrate, perform well under pressure and answer questions with clarity when you're feeling relaxed and recharged. Cramming the night before or frantically going over details at the last minute will only leave you feeling stressed and potentially confused.

STEP 7



Go back to the basics

Whilst most of the exam will feel complex, remember to focus on the little things. Count on the basics, those small yet important clinical skills to get you easy marks. Wash your hands at the beginning and end of each skill, introduce yourself confidently, ask for informed consent, dress professionally, dispose of equipment properly — and above all, be kind to the patients.

These may all seem straightforward and insignificant, but they play just as valuable a role as the more complex skills in how you're perceived and marked in each exam station.

STEP 8



Take it one step at a time

During the exam, it's easy to lose focus and stress about your performance at the previous station. But it's vitally important to focus only on the station at present. Put the previous stations out of mind and pay attention to the task at hand. You're also more likely to skim instructions when you're stressed out. Take a moment, breathe, and read the station instructions thoroughly, 2 or 3 times at least, to make sure you know exactly what the examiner wants you to do in the exam session.

For example: if you conduct an upper limb neurological examination perfectly but the station actually asked for you to examine the lower limb, then you won't gain any marks and all that hard work would have been for nothing.

STEP 9



Be confident in your skills

Just before the exam, you're sure to find yourself thinking about all the mistakes you've made whilst practicing, and how difficult you've found it to master certain skills. It's easy to be hard on yourself. But remember that your examiner has never met you before. They didn't see you practice — all they're thinking about is that you might just be the best candidate they'll see all day.

Try to recall all the positive feedback you've earned throughout the year and be as confident as you can in your techniques. Then, even when you make a mistake, the examiner will mark you based on your overall manner and approach — confidence really does make all the difference.

STEP 10



Be your own biggest fan

At the end of the exam, resist the temptation of 'post mortem' — comparing your performance and results to your friends'. This will only leave you panicking and depressed. Remember that once the exam is over, it's over. You did your best and that's all that matters. Don't let yourself focus on mistakes made.

Celebrate what you did well and where you got high marks. Most of all, be proud of yourself for completing such a momentous step in your medical career!



Your OSCEs demand a lot of practice and revision,

but that doesn't mean they have to leave you feeling frustrated or stressed out. Use these 10 tips as a jumping off point, then explore revision methods that work best for you. Explore more exam guides, tips and tricks made just for medical students.

Explore more