



TRACERS

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The MOC Exam Experience: Recollections of 2013 Takers

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Four of us were elected directors of the Board in 2013, but before becoming official members, we had a hurdle to overcome: the Maintenance of Certification (MOC) exam. Perhaps this qualifies all of us as gluttons for punishment. Because of the ramifications of a passing or failing score, the MOC exam instills quite a bit of angst. In this article, we will review the purpose of the MOC exam and share our experiences in an effort to alleviate some of the stress.

The ABNM MOC exam is part of the MOC process. Technically, it judges the so-called “cognitive expertise” component of MOC. Other components of MOC include professional standing, lifelong learning and self-assessment and practice performance assessment. The MOC exam must be taken at a minimum of every ten years, although it is possible to take the exam up to two years early. If taken early, the new certificate is valid for ten years from the expiration of the existing certificate, not from the test year.

The exam is not meant to be overly stressful, but rather representative of our specialty, prompting us to refresh and keep current with our knowledge. The MOC exam is made up of computerized multiple-choice questions, ranging from easy to difficult. Time allotted is four hours (shorter than the allotted 8 hours for the certifying exam). The MOC exam is not designed to be time-pressured; in 2013, all takers finished with time to spare.

The next section of the article includes some of the questions that we had during preparation for the exam. We are happy to share what we have learned.

Will there be hard questions?

Psychometrics, the field that studies testing, has developed rules for good exam questions – questions that provide the best discrimination among test takers. One rule is that the average test taker should have about an equal chance of getting the question right or wrong. With such a relatively low probability of being answered correctly, the questions must be challenging, and all of the available answer choices should be reasonable. Some questions involve clinical judgment rather than a clear-cut correct answer. While the Board attempts to avoid obscure facts, few questions have immediately obvious answers. The overall passing score reflects this relatively low likelihood (~60%) of a test taker getting a correct answer on any given question. Because all MOC exam takers have previously passed the certifying exam, those who are keeping current should also be able to pass the MOC exam. Despite the hard questions, the MOC exam pass rate is high, ranging from 96-99% in recent years.

Do I need to know unapproved radiopharmaceuticals and indications?

MOC is a continuous, life-long learning experience, reflecting physicians’ need to stay current with changes in practice. Thus, the MOC exam may test knowledge of emerging radiopharmaceuticals and techniques. Purely pre-clinical or very early phase clinical research is not included, but radiopharmaceuticals and techniques in more advanced stages of development are fair game. Emerging tracers and techniques included on the MOC exam are generally the subject of frequent publications from multiple centers and are common topics of discussion at local, national and international meetings. Basic principles about these emerging applications, rather than details, are more likely to be tested.

How are the questions ordered?

The ABNM MOC exam questions are presented in random order to each taker, and all takers get all questions to answer. You may get the easiest or the most difficult questions at the beginning of the test. The question difficulty does not change with correct or incorrect answers.

What was the question writer thinking?

Many questions will have a capitalized word, such as BEST or MOST. In such questions, some or all of the answers may seem reasonable. The task is to pick the best or most likely answer.

While an individual may write questions that emphasize his or her point of view, a group of Board members review and edit the exam questions. This strives to lessen the emphasis on a particular view and instead reaches a consensus opinion. Despite all the work that goes into writing and vetting the questions, mistakes are still possible. After the exam period is complete, the performance of every question is reviewed. Poorly performing questions can be removed prior to scoring the examination.

What happens on the day of the exam?

The MOC exam is given at Pearson VUE testing centers. These centers are conveniently located throughout the country, and they administer a wide variety of exams. When you check in for the exam, fellow test takers may be sitting for other medical board exams or wildly different tests such as language or information technology certifications. Each exam has its own requirements as to identification and documentation, so make sure you follow the directions carefully. You can also expect to be fingerprinted or have your palm vein pattern taken. You will be given a locker in which to securely store your belongings during the test (nothing is allowed in, including watches, for example). Once checked in, you will be called in and registered. The staff will take your picture and, at the appropriate time, will bring you to a computer. You will be given an erasable note board and marker for use during the exam. A computerized scientific calculator is also available to examinees. You will be given instructions on exam timing and what to do if you need to interrupt the exam, for example, to use the restroom.

Once the exam starts, the questions are given sequentially. You can always go back to questions and can even mark the questions that are uncertain for review later. Images are shown along with the questions, and there may be videos. The exam warns you if you have not seen all of the images/videos available with a question. The testing software is straightforward; however, if you have not taken a computerized test before, it is helpful to try the online tutorial sent with the registration material to familiarize yourself with the format and tools. Again, all test takers this past year finished with time to spare.

If you want to learn more about MOC, please visit our website, www.abnm.org, and click on "Maintenance of Certification." On the website, you can find a collection of sample exam questions to get a better sense of the style of questions you will be seeing on the exam. Another link that you may find interesting is this one to the "Maintenance of Certification FAQ brochure