

# The Medical Short Case: An Examination Guide



## Penang Medical Post-graduate Group:

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*Photos on cover* : muscular dystrophy, hyperthyroidism, erythema nodosum, rheumatoid arthritis.

*Photo above* : internuclear ophthalmoplegia

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## Publisher's Preface

The Penang Medical Practitioners' Society (PMPS) is pleased to publish this book which is aimed at helping doctors prepare for their postgraduate examination and promoting continuous medical education. Undergraduates will also find this book useful in their preparation for their final clinical examinations. It is my hope too that practicing general practitioners will also find this book useful in refreshing their knowledge, keeping in touch with the latest medical developments or when sitting for higher examinations such as the Fellowship in Family Medicine or the FRACGP.

With the vast increase in medical knowledge and ongoing advancements, it is now increasingly recognized that undergraduate and postgraduate medical education needs to be conducted through coordinated, well-taught and applicable courses of instruction. The idea of printing this book was first mooted by Dr Ong Hean Teik, with whom PMPS had previously published 3 books. It is based on the efforts of Penang Hospital specialists especially Drs Lim Thien Thien, Ma Soot Keng, Ong Choo Khoon, Tan Woi Chiang and Teh Kok Peng. Professor Richard Loh, head of Medicine at the Penang Medical College, and his friends in the academic community contributed by writing on what examiners look for in the clinical short case. These dedicated Penang consultants have been successfully organising annual courses for candidates sitting for the MRCP PACES examination (clinical part). The participation of many doctors, from locally as well as from overseas, is testimony to the success and popularity of their courses. They have now decided to compile their courses into a book so that doctors who cannot attend the courses will also benefit. The PMPS is proud to support their efforts.

We have thus far published 4 books: Medicine for the Layman (1989, editor Lee Yan San), Seminars in Cardiology (1994, editor Ong Hean Teik), To Heal the Sick: The story of healthcare and doctors in Penang (2004, editor Ong Hean Teik) and The Life of a Doctor: A career guide (2005, editor Ong Hean Teik). We are thus very happy to produce another educational book aimed to enhance the competency and knowledge of the medical community.

***"To study medicine without books is to sail an uncharted sea, whilst to study medicine only from books is not to go to sea at all." (Sir William Osler)***

Dato' Dr Lim Huat Bee, President 2010-11  
Dr Vejayan Rajoo, President 2011-12  
Dato' Dr Lim Boon Sho, Treasurer 2007-2011  
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**FOREWORD BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF HEALTH MALAYSIA**



Problem-solving and case studies have traditionally been some of the time-honoured methods utilized by the medical profession, towards the advancement of medical knowledge and teaching, with the ultimate aim of benefiting the patient, who is after all, at the centre of the medical profession's universe. The medical short case is much favoured by the medical fraternity due to the fact that it enables the knowledge that has been acquired to be applied to "real-world" cases, thus enriching the learning experience, in order for us to become better doctors. Thus, I would like to commend the authors and publishers for their invaluable contribution to the medical fraternity in Malaysia, with the publication of "The Medical Short Case - An Examination Guide".

This book is the result of co-operation between doctors in private practice, in the universities and in Government service. The Ministry of Health Malaysia is pleased that one of its core values i.e. "teamwork" is epitomized by the commendable work of the medical profession across all sectors in Penang, who are able to work together to support and add value to each other's endeavour. We must never lose sight of the fact that all of us share the noble aim of combating disease as well as improving the health of our community .

Dr HT Ong and Professor RLC Loh are to be congratulated for co-ordinating and channeling the enthusiasm of their younger colleagues into this worthwhile endeavour. It is my hope that Drs TT Lim, KP Teh, SK Ma, WC Tan, CK Ong and BP Ooi, as doctors serving in our public hospitals, will continue to teach and train for our students and medical officers. Life-long education is an indispensable part of the life of a doctor, and often, the teacher learns as much as the student from their interactions. This work is evidence that, in the Malaysian medical set-up, we have the personnel, facilities and material for our trainees to succeed in an established international post-graduate assessment as the MRCP PACES examination. Useful as this book may be to the examination candidate, never forget the fact that medicine is a "hands-on" profession and there is no substitute for practical patient handling in preparing for the short case.

To all those who have contributed to this commendable effort, remember that Bernard Meltzer once said "Blessed are those who give without remembering. And blessed are those who take without forgetting".

**Dato' Dr. Hasan bin Abdul Rahman**  
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## Foreword by Penang State Director of Health

I would like to congratulate the Penang Medical Practitioners' Society (PMPS) for their admirable efforts in promoting continuing medical education among our doctors and helping to train the next generation of physicians. I have no doubt doctors preparing for their postgraduate or undergraduate examinations, or even practising general practitioners trying to update their knowledge, will find this book a useful guide and reference.

The PMPS has all along been very active in activities which aim to upgrade the skills and knowledge of Penang doctors, many of which were organised in collaboration with doctors in the government sector. This book is another product of these efforts. Penang is very fortunate to have this excellent private-public sector collaboration which has resulted, not only in increased opportunities for medical education, but also in better relationships and networking between the both. We look forward to working with the PMPS in their future endeavours.

I would also like to record my appreciation and thanks to the dedicated specialists who have contributed their writings to this book. I understand that this is not standard textbook material but consist of tips and 'lessons learnt' from doctors who have passed through the examination halls themselves. I am sure these 'pearls of wisdom' will come in handy especially for those undergoing the gruelling MRCP PACES examination. I would also like to remind our young doctors that it's not only good clinical skills but also proper bedside manners, appropriate attire and effective communication skills that will make the cut where and when it matters.

My best wishes to our young doctors who are preparing for their final clinical MRCP examination!

*"An inquiring, analytical mind; an unquenchable thirst for new knowledge; and a heartfelt compassion for the ailing - these are prominent traits among the committed clinicians who have preserved the passion for medicine."*

- Lois DeBakey, Ph.D.

Dato' Dr Teh Lei Choo  
State Health Director  
Penang

# Introduction: How to use this book

Ong Hean Teik

This book is mainly the work of trainees at the Department of Medicine, Penang Hospital. As medical officers employed by the Ministry of Health, their primary duty is to provide service to the sick present at the hospital. Yet their enthusiasm and discipline saw them find the time and energy to prepare for and pass the MRCP examination which then allowed them entry to specialist training. They have been sharing their experience and knowledge with other trainees by running an MRCP PACES course since 2007. The Departments of Medicine of Penang Hospital and Penang Medical College have supported these courses with input from their specialists and lecturers. Local and even foreign candidates preparing for the MRCP examination have been increasingly enthusiastic about the course value and usefulness. Looking at the wealth of examination material accumulated over the years, the Penang Medical Practitioners' Society has agreed to publish this book.

The short case examination in the final year medical curriculum, Masters of Medicine and MRCP essentially test the same skills namely the ability to methodically approach a patient and pick out the abnormal clinical signs. However, examination format, maturity of conduct, ability to correlate signs and competence in management planning expected from the candidate will differ.

To succeed in the short case, the candidate must recognise clinical signs. To recognise signs, the candidate must know what the signs are, and what conditions they suggest. The illustrations in this book remind candidates what the signs are, and the subsequent discussion highlights what else they have to look for and how to handle potential examiner questions. So in using this book, read the question, look at the picture and then pause. Go through in your mind how you intend to examine the patient and what you can find. Decide in your mind exactly how you intend to present to the examiner, before proceeding to read the diagnosis and discussion that follow the illustration. Other sections of the book are more theoretical, containing advice for prospective candidates as well as factual information. While this book seeks to give the candidate helpful advice, mental preparation and theoretical knowledge, do remember that there is no substitute for daily practice and clinical examination of patients in preparing for the short case.

Passing an examination significantly increases one's self-worth, career prospects and earning capability. Yet more often knowledge and wisdom are acquired after a failure. Always remember that the loser is not the one who gets knocked down, but rather the winner is the one who gets up most often. Preparing for the short case is part of acquiring medical knowledge which will one day help the sick, and even save a life!!

*“My advice to candidates is to be as experienced as you can. Go back to day one of medical training and read a clinical methods book. Appreciate the applied physiology. Understand what physical signs mean. A lot of junior doctors are poor at analysing them. Be observed in your clinical method by a senior doctor prepared to compliment or criticise” (1).*

Professor Peter Kopelman, MRCP clinical examining board.

Reference:

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Available at:  
[http://www.whittington.nhs.uk/Documents/How%20to%20pass%20MRCP\\_2075.pdf](http://www.whittington.nhs.uk/Documents/How%20to%20pass%20MRCP_2075.pdf)

# Chapter 1:

## Preparing for the medical short case examination

Ong Hean Teik, Lim Thien Thien, Ma Soot Keng

No other medical examination is as challenging as the short case. Over a span of 5 - 10 min while being scrutinised by 2 respected examiners, the candidate is expected to assess a region of the body, pick up the abnormality, suggest possible underlying causes and propose a plan of action. It is the examination at which the candidate is most likely to fail, with serious loss of time, money and most importantly morale.

While the aim of medical training is to produce a caring and competent doctor, it is a fact of life that examinations have to be passed. What makes the short case so intimidating is that no formal curriculum time is set aside for it, and few books are available for the stressed candidate. We hope our book will help both the postgraduate and final year medical trainee in the Asian region avoid the painful trials many of us had to face personally after tripping up in the short case examination.

### Adopt an examination method and practise daily

The short case is actually a fairly realistic representation of what a doctor faces in the busy follow up outpatient department. In a busy clinic, there is often insufficient time to dwell at length into the history, while some elderly patients are unable to report anything more than the briefest clue about the problem they face. Thus, the candidate can, and should, be practising for the short case examination every day during his work or posting at the clinic. Develop a method of assessing each organ system that is methodical, reproducible, comprehensive and comfortable to you. The suggestions we present in the subsequent chapters of this book are merely a guide. It is vital for the candidate to adapt and practise them before settling on and adopting an examination method of his own for each organ system. Useful tips and videos on clinical skills and examination techniques are found in the teaching websites set up by the Medical Faculty of the University of Florida and by doctors from the Queen's University of Belfast (1, 2).

As every football player knows, the more you practise taking a penalty, the more likely you will succeed in scoring a goal no matter how tense the environment or what the goalkeeper does. At the cardiac outpatient clinic, practise the short case examination of the heart; at the gastro clinic, practise the examination of the abdomen. No matter how busy the clinic, each patient should have at least 10 min, and the short case examination routine will only take about 5 min. Thus, each clinic session is an opportunity to practise short case skills. These skills will in fact form the basis for patient assessment throughout your medical career spanning many decades. Thus the conscientious doctor would not just be getting ready for his examination, he is actually developing a good examination system to make his whole medical career successful and rewarding.

## The importance of observing

The clinical skill most often ignored and least well developed is that of observing. Candidates always seem in a rush to show off their clinical examination technique, but miss out on the obvious distended jugular veins, radial-artery shunt or facial pallor. As Sherlock Holmes says in *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*, ‘The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes’ (3). As you approach the patient, think like a detective would, constantly looking for relevant clues. Use this or other similar short-case books as guides on what to look out for when instructed to assess each type of patient (4, 5, 6). As you introduce yourself and approach the patient, spend 30s observing his posture/position, face, hand and limbs. Focus your mind to be alert to seek relevant clinical abnormal signs. After all, the eyes only see what the mind is alert to and aware of!! This is what actually happens in a clinic, for clinical observation begins the moment a patient walks in. However do not imagine what is not there and do not waste time needlessly afterwards presenting a long list of negative findings. During the short case, as in an outpatient follow-up clinic, the doctor should pick up and process significant distress-causing clinical abnormalities and not waste time and effort on irrelevant issues.

## Forget the examiners

Many candidates already anxious on entering the examination hall, panic on being questioned and give inaudible or contradictory answers, going onto a self-induced path to failure. Others put on an unnecessary rehearsed “show”, hoping to impress the examiners. Yet a candidate intensely looking at the fingers and palpating the nail bed for clubbing when the nails are obviously normal is actually wasting time and leaving a poor impression on the examiners. The best mental approach to the short case examination is to try to disregard the examiners’ presence. Listen to their instructions, but concentrate on the patient. It is the patient who has the clinical abnormalities, and it is thus the patient who holds the key to success in the short case.

Think of the examiners as you would relatives accompanying a patient to the clinic. Some are sceptical, others are supportive. You listen to what they have to say about the patient, but you do not want to be distracted by their presence. Concentrate on the patient, whether in clinic or examination room, and focus your mind and senses to seek the abnormal clinical findings. The only way to impress the examiners, or patient’s relative, is to be a competent doctor by picking up correctly the source of the patient’s discomfort. Mentally diminishing the role of the examiners and focusing on the patient will also help reduce stress and anxiety, an excess of which inevitably leads to failure.

## How hungry are you

Jim Rogers, a highly successful investor less lucky in love, fathered two daughters in his sixties. He has written a book advising them how to face the challenges of life as he may not be around when they grow up. He tells them to ‘focus on what you like’ and that “lady luck smiles on those who continue in their efforts” (7).

So how much do you like being a doctor? How much time, effort and energy are you willing to put into your quest to become a physician? If you like being a doctor, then you will come to appreciate that the effort put into developing an examination technique for each organ system will make you a more competent doctor, and make your time at the clinic and wards more fruitful.

Do you have the discipline to work hard to pursue your dreams? Having successfully faced numerous examinations from school through university, there is no doubt you have the intellectual potential to pass the medical short case. But a doctor needs to be more than knowledgeable. He has to be caring, to be disciplined enough to attend to the urgently sick even if tired or hungry. So to pass the examination, you need to demonstrate that you have been disciplined enough to put in the energy to practise your techniques, that caring for the sick and picking up what distresses them is something you do routinely. If you have been a competent, caring and professional doctor in your daily work, just relax, be confident, show the examiners what you do daily and pass the short case examination.

## Know the examination format

Although all short case examinations share numerous similarities, they each are a little different. Each examining faculty or college conducts its short case clinical examination following its own format, and this examination structure is being continuously modified. Thus, you need to know the latest format of the short case examination you are facing, and be ready for it. How many cases are there, how much time is allocated for examination and how much for examiner questioning? Speak to previous candidates as well as examiners and study the website and material handed out by the examining college. As Sun Tzu notes in his classic Art of War, “if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles” (8). No doubt about it, preparing for the short case examination is like preparing for battle. But with confidence in your strengths, with preparation and practice of your examining method for each organ system, with care and consideration for patient welfare in daily work, and knowing how you will be tested in the short case examination, you will be successful in your short case battles.

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