

Practice Makes Perfect

New board exam, new test-prep guide

Monya De

Who could see it coming: Surely an additional step in the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) would mean a new test-preparation book couldn't be far behind. So in June, as the National Board of Medical Examiners prepared to roll out its clinical-skills exam (CSE) for fourth-years, the publisher of the popular *First Aid* series of review books offered up **First Aid for the USMLE Step 2 CS Clinical Skills** (McGraw-Hill/Appleton & Lange, \$34.95). Thousands of medical students have entrusted their Step 1 and 2 preparations to *First Aid* editors Vikas Bhushan and Tao Le, but the CSE, with its patient-interview format, is a dramatic departure from more familiar multiple-choice tests. Can *First Aid for the USMLE Step 2 CS* deliver in this time of need?

For this guide, fellow editors L. David Martin, Fadi Abu Shahin and Mae Sheikh-Ali join Bhushan and Le to collectively offer an effective review in which strengths far outweigh any minor problems. The book is a welcome help to students preparing for an exam with no history and, therefore, who have no help from previous test-takers.

The volume is divided into four sections: an introduction and checklist for those preparing to take the exam, a detailed discussion of the patient encounters that make up the exam, a collection of practice cases and a set of "mini-cases." The introductory section contains such tips as reminding bilingual test-takers to refrain from speaking to other students in foreign languages during down time to avoid arousing suspicions of cheating. However, as with previous *First Aid* books, the crucial information in the introduction lacks sidebars, tables and a summary, making the information difficult to digest.

The patient encounter section is solidly written, with extensive lists of suggested patient-interview questions, do's and don'ts, and troubleshooting ideas for unusual situations. And unlike the introductory section, it is visually designed to be easily digestible, an important factor for busy medical students pressed for preparation time.

The practice cases alone make this book worthwhile. As with the real exam, with each case, readers get an introduction to the patient, a list of problems, a plan for the physical exam and a blank form to write examination notes. The book facilitates group study by including the information given to the patient-actor: appropriate responses to questions the student might ask, symptoms to feign and a checklist of diagnostic tests the student should perform. For each case, there is a completed note so the student can compare his with one containing all the appropriate information, possible diagnoses and diagnostic tests. The mini-cases are structured differently, addressing separate symptoms and guiding the reader through the associated differential diagnoses.

The book does a good job of explaining the conditions of a correct differential diagnosis, although the rank-order of the conditions' importance could be better clarified. But the explanations of the suggested diagnostic tests are helpful, saving the reader from cracking open their copy of *Stedman's Medical Dictionary*. Some of the suggested physical-exam tests are explained, but a glossary for quick reference would have been helpful.

Without a multitude of resources to prepare for the CSE, *First Aid* can provide familiarity with the exam and pinpoint areas students need to further study. While no substitute for true clinical knowledge, it is a start. ❖



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New board exam new test-prep guide

What could be a better study aid than a book that provides the most current information on the board exam? The new *First Aid to the Board Exam* (FA) is a comprehensive review of the board exam, covering all the topics that you will encounter on the exam. The book is written by a board member and is a must-have for anyone preparing for the exam. The book is available in paperback and hardcover. The paperback version is \$19.95 and the hardcover version is \$29.95. The book is available at www.firstaidtotheboardexam.com.



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