ORAL EXAMINATION
Significance

- Evaluation (incl. Preparing examinations) is one of the most important tasks of teachers.
- Exam results are the most tangible indicators of how much students have learned.
- Examinations are the source of most controversies.
Objectives

- Description
- Variants
- Appropriate uses
- Advantages
- Disadvantages and limitations
- Variables that may be sources of errors
- Suggestions to improve oral exams
Oral Examination

- Formal exam
- Face-to-face interaction/personal contact
- Verbal response
- Immediate response
Oral Examination

Four basic formats for oral examination

1. Interview style – the examinee is quizzed on general topics
Oral Examination

Four basic formats for oral examination

2. Clinical style – questions are specifically regarding diagnosis and treatment plans for a particular patient
Oral Examination

Four basic formats for oral examination

3. Cognitive style – requires problem solving around specific cases.
Oral Examination

Four basic formats for oral examination

4. Role-playing style – students assume various “roles” with the examinee.
Variants of Oral Exam

- Bedside questioning
- Questioning during teaching conferences and case presentations
- Questions on student’s progress during laboratory activities
Appropriate Uses of an Oral Exam

- To assess attributes that require observation and interaction
  - Interpersonal skills
  - Ability to “think on his feet”
  - Ability to respond to changes in situation
  - Ability to assume an appropriate role and perform within this role
Appropriate Uses of an Oral Exam

- To assess components of competence
- To assess personal characteristics
  - Appearance and manner
  - Competence, alertness and honesty in responding
  - Capacity for empathy and sensitivity
Appropriate Uses of an Oral Exam

EXAMINERS

- Good verbal ability to express themselves
- Ability to control bias and subjectivity
- Properly oriented to testing situation and exam material
- Available in person for sufficiently long periods of time
Candidates or Examinees

- Few in number who can be tested individually
Advantages of Oral Exam

- Direct personal contact with candidates
- Opportunity to take mitigating circumstances into account
- Flexibility in moving from candidates strong points to weak areas
- Requires the candidate to formulate his own replies without clues
Advantages of Oral Exam

- Opportunity to question the candidate about how to arrive at an answer
- Ability to test depth and breadth of candidates thinking process and logic of arguments
- Opportunity for simultaneous assessment by two examiners
Disadvantages and Limitations of Oral Exams

- Lack standardization
- Lack objectivity and reproducibility of results (halo effect)
- Permit favoritism and possible abuse of contact
Disadvantages and Limitations of Oral Exams

- Suffer from undue influence or irrelevant factors
- Suffer from shortage of trained examiners to administer the exam
- Excessively costly in terms of professional time in relation to the limited value of the information it yields
Variables in Oral Exam that may be Sources of Errors

- Content of examination
- Examination situation
- Examiner
- Candidate’s performance
Content of Examination

- Often dependent on
  - Examiner (bias and familiarity with subject matter)
  - Availability of case (unstructured to highly structured)
  - Time
Examination Situation

- Orientation of examinee
- Manner of questioning (close ended/ open ended)
- Presentation of case material
- Familiarity with environment
Examiners

- Mannerisms and cues
- Validity
  - Specify abilities to be measured
- Reliability
  - Test structure, question clarity, agreement on correct answers
  - Differences on examiner rating
Candidate’s Performance

“Oral examination scores given by both seasoned and new examiners are influenced by the examinees verbal style, dress and answer content”

*Academic Medicine, 1991*
Suggestions to Improve Oral Exams

- Define areas of competence and traits to be assessed
- Design standardized case materials
  - Standardization is the extent to which the examination is consistent, equivalent and comparable for all candidates
Example of Examination Checklist

CASE SCENARIO

55/M, hypertensive, with atrial fibrillation, presenting with on and off colicky abdominal pain, progressive abdominal distention, decreased caliber of stools and weight loss.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPECTED TASK PERFORMED</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Asked pertinent history</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Previous surgery</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Family history of CA</td>
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<td>c. Other medical conditions</td>
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<td>2. Pertinent complete P.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Assessed chest and lungs</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Focused on abdominal finding</td>
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<td>c. Performed rectal exam*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPECTED TASKS</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Performed proctosigmoidoscopy with biopsy</td>
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<td>4. Requested appropriate diagnostic tests</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. CBC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Electrolytes</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. EKG*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Chest x-ray*</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Plain abdominal x-rays*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPECTED TASK PERFORMED</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interpreted plain abdominal x-rays correctly</td>
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<td>6. Made correct diagnosis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Oral Examination

Raters ranked good performances more consistently than poor performances.

Therefore, more than one examiner appears necessary to confirm a poor performance during an examination.

Academic Medicine, 1999
Appropriate use of oral examination requires substantial revision of the examiner’s role. Instead of merely acting as ‘quiz masters’, they should make certain policy decisions in advance regarding what is to be assessed and they must design examination problems that are compatible with those policy decisions.

Medical Education, 1985
Oral Examination

The quality of the oral examination could be improved if examiners asked more open-ended questions at the problem solving level... better fulfill its original objective of assessing the clinical reasoning skills necessary for the future specialist.

Teaching and Learning, 1993