Australian
Medical Council Limited

Tips from Examiners

Australian Medical Council Limited | October 2024

> ***"The purpose of the Australian Medical Council is to ensure that standards of education, training and assessment of the medical profession promote and protect the health of the Australian Community."***

Table of Contents

1. Review/Revision of Clinical Skills

AMC clinical examiners collectively have a wealth of experience in assessing the performance of clinical tasks by Australian medical students at all levels, as well as that of junior doctors. This experience is invaluable in the accurate assessment of candidates at the AMC clinical examination.

The clinical examination assesses the application of your clinical judgment, attitudes, and skills as informed by your knowledge base. It does not only test knowledge.

We recommend that candidates comprehensively review and revise their clinical skills, working through the four predominant assessment areas of the AMC clinical assessment history taking, examination, diagnostic formulation, and management/counselling/education (see section 2.12 of the Clinical Examination Specification book). It is useful to reflect on differences between your medical training curricula and health system compared to the Australian health system and, therefore, identify gaps/areas for improvement. An individual candidate's MCQ examination feedback may provide a useful guide to areas of strength and weakness in clinical knowledge of relevance.

The standard of the examination is that expected of graduating medical students in the Australian Healthcare system. This applies to foundation clinical skills, clinical competence, patient safety, and multidisciplinary team function. More specifically, it applies to all aspects of consultation skills and doctor/patient-carer-team communications, including the use of clearly enunciated, specific, non-technical English.

Experience suggests that preparation for the clinical examination is better assisted by a review of Australian Medical Council publications, and resources online resources and medical journals covering common clinical conditions and scenarios encountered in hospital and community settings. This is considered to be more effective than concentrating on large general reference texts in preparing for the clinical examination. The ability to correctly and accurately demonstrate physical and mental state examination skills is essential.

Candidates are encouraged to practise, review, revise, and practise again, remembering to rehearse the rate and clarity of speech.

The AMC examiners also consider that candidates who are able to maintain continuing contact with the practice of clinical medicine in a hospital or other relevant clinical service improves their chances of success in the AMC examination. It is in each candidate's best interest to identify their clinical strengths and weaknesses and focus on overcoming any basic clinical deficiencies before sitting the examination.

2. General preparation for the clinical examination

The following points are suggested to assist candidates in planning for and sitting the clinical examination.

Be aware that the AMC works from a large database of rotating case scenarios. Elements such as demographics and presenting problem may be identical from case to case but have alternative associated symptoms, signs, test results, and conditions/diagnoses for you to uncover. In your approach to the scenario, avoid relying on cues that may have been communicated to you by past candidates or other sources. Any candidate who attempts to formulate a diagnosis or management on the basis of information provided by other candidates without having taken a relevant history, examined the patient and interpreted the signs correctly themselves will compromise their assessment.

2.1. Planning for the examination – face to face

Candidates are advised to:

- Read the placement letter carefully and note the time and exact location of your examination
- If travelling from interstate, carefully check any interstate time differences and allow extra time in case of delayed flights or travel time between the airport and the city. Allow for any delays in the examination when booking your return flight
- Rest well for at least one night before presenting for the examination and ensure adequate hydration and nutrition
- Avoid the use of stimulants, sedatives, or other drugs, including alcohol, that may impair performance
- Ensure you arrive on time for each clinical examination session, allowing sufficient time to settle down before the examination commences
- Consider rescheduling for an exam if unwell; contact AMC staff as soon as possible.

2.2. During the examination

During the examination, candidates are advised to:

- Focus on the general orientation/instructions and “centre” yourself; avoid being distracted by other candidates
- Read the given case information carefully, including attached images (photographs, charts and the like), the setting (general/community practice or hospital), urban or rural, and your role. This information is specific to the particular case, and your approach should be tailored accordingly
- Take careful note of tasks to be undertaken

- Note any suggested times for tasks. Plan your time, attention and approach accordingly
- You may be interacting with real, role-playing/standardised/simulated or videoed patients or with a combination of a model or chart and simulated patient/carer/team member
- Listen to the opening statement of the patient/carer/team member and observe their behaviours carefully
- Speak clearly, use plain language to the patient/carer/team member, avoid rapid speech, and repeat any phrases that have not been understood. Examiners note how you interact with the patient, carer or team member
- In tailoring your history, be guided by any specific time allowance. A history taken in 1-2 minutes is unlikely to reach the standard expected when 5 minutes has been specified for the task
- In any physical or mental state examination, exercise care in technique and accuracy to ensure the patient is not caused unnecessary discomfort
- Follow any instructions given by the examiner during the scenario
- Ask for clarification or repetition when uncertain about any instruction, statement, or question from an examiner, patient/carer/team member
- Demonstrate to the patient/carer/team member the same standard of care expected of all medical practitioners at all times.

3. Tips from AMC Examiner Observations

As in any examination, it is critical that you read and process all the information provided, noting the tasks and suggested times, and plan your approach accordingly. No marks are given for doing a task that is not requested.

Note that:

- Each scenario will mainly focus on performance in one of four Predominant Assessment Areas (PAAs) - History, Examination, Diagnostic Formulation and Management/Counselling/ Education
- The tasks in any particular case may address a mixture of these Assessment Areas
- The number of tasks and suggested times to allocate to each indicate the predominant focus of the scenario and where marking will be directed.

A general observation is that the approach of some candidates to a particular scenario is as if they are convinced that they know the answer/recognise the case from some element or 'clue' and do not proceed to address the tasks adequately or systematically. Incomplete performance of all the tasks is unlikely to constitute an overall satisfactory performance in that scenario.

Although this is a stressful examination situation, try to place yourself as the clinician you are and respond to the simulated patient as if they are in a real consultation with you and, respond as their doctor, focusing on the clinical scenario and tasks.

The following tips for candidates and commonly observed issues are listed by Predominant Assessment Areas (PAAs).

3.1. History PAA

History scenarios predominantly assess your ability to communicate with your patient/their carer/team member, respond specifically to the presenting problem/s, obtain a relevant, systematic, and appropriately thorough history, and demonstrate your clinical knowledge and reasoning in doing so.

A candidate who performs well may do the following:

- Note any times given for a particular task and plan your performance accordingly. For example, if 5 minutes is allocated to history, you should use all this time to gather information
- Use the information provided in reading time and the patient's initial statements and observed behaviour to focus your questions
- Listen carefully to the patient's answers and respond appropriately
- Probe for more detail as appropriate
- Follow a relevant and organised approach that demonstrates your clinical reasoning.

Things to avoid:

- Not using the given candidate information as a base to frame your data gathering
- Not listening to or responding specifically to the initial statements or concerns of the patient/carer/team member
- Taking a cursory history and jumping to a conclusion about the diagnosis or next step
- Overuse of closed questions
- Using double-barrelled questions seeking a closed yes/no answer – e.g. 'Do you have vomiting and diarrhoea?' This risks gathering inaccurate information
- Phrasing questions with technical terms, incurring inaccurate responses or requests for clarification
- Taking a 'scattergun' or random approach in your line of questioning
- Not demonstrating clinical reasoning or not using previous answers or information to inform the next question.

3.2. Examination PAA

An examination scenario predominantly assesses your ability to perform relevant physical and mental state examinations of common problems, demonstrating appropriate techniques and delivering logically and coherently. It is crucial to accurately identify and interpret physical and mental signs/findings. Areas of assessment may include your choice and technique of examination, the organisation and sequence of your examination, the accuracy of your examination, your commentary or explanation of the procedure and/or familiarity with the equipment.

In-person examination

A candidate who performs well may do the following:

- Will pay close attention to relevant information in the stem
- Can adapt to multiple examination modalities, e.g. role-playing, standardised, simulated, videoed or 'real' patient, or of a model or video recording
- Listen carefully to the patient's opening statement and carefully observe their behaviour
- Identify what is the most important examination focus relevant to the clinical problem when given the task of undertaking a relevant or focused examination. Ask yourself: 'What information do I need from this examination?' For example, suppose the suspected problem is peripheral vascular disease. In that case, you will probably run out of time to perform the expected vascular examination of the lower limb if you start with a neurological examination
- Is familiar with commonly used diagnostic equipment and assessment proforma
- Demonstrates a fluent and accurate technique
- Performs the necessary examination in a respectful way that enables you to elicit the signs while minimising patient discomfort

- Systematically report exactly what you find in your patient/model on that day using appropriate terminology. Be specific about what you have observed
- If the task is to report your findings to the examiner as you proceed, then report all the positive and significant negative findings.

Things to avoid:

- If a history component is part of the station, not doing this in a focused manner and within any given time limit
- Saying to the examiner, 'I would like to...' or 'I am going to examine…' without actually doing the examination carefully
- Presuming any findings in a case
- Taking a scattergun approach to examination
- Not demonstrating familiarity with basic equipment; for example, unable to turn on an otoscope or ophthalmoscope or incorrectly placing a BP cuff
- Lack of correct and appropriate technique of physical or mental state examination. For example:
  - The predominant system or body part selected for examination lacks relevance to the case, such as a neurological examination instead of a musculoskeletal examination for a painful wrist
  - Poor physical examination technique that makes eliciting signs impossible; for example, palpation of the abdomen is so light that no tenderness or organomegaly could possibly be elicited
  - Mental state examination technique that makes eliciting relevant findings impossible; for example, mood/affect are not sought; judgment questions are poorly aligned to patient presentation
  - Not differentiating between judgment and insight in the mental state examination
- Not demonstrating familiarity with basic evaluation frameworks (e.g. Glasgow Coma Scale or Folstein Mini-Mental State proforma) or with standard medication or fluid charts
- Lack of accuracy in the identification of physical and mental state signs (both present and absent). For example:
  - An absent peripheral pulse is identified as present
  - A delusion is identified when it is an hallucination which has been sought
- Where there is a task to report findings to the examiner as you proceed, remember it is the findings the examiner wants to hear, not simply what you are examining for
- Poor time management during the case (including ignoring the time prompts) and running out of time.

Online assessment of examination PAA

These stations are mainly descriptive tasks that describe what examination you would perform, how you would do it, and what you are looking for given the clinical scenario.

You may be directed to use technical language and anatomical landmarks in your description.

A candidate who performs well may do the following:

- Identify what is the most important examination focus relevant to the clinical problem when given the task of describing a relevant or focused examination. Ask yourself: 'What information do I need from this examination?' For example, suppose the suspected problem is peripheral vascular disease. In that case, you will probably run out of time to perform the expected vascular examination of the lower limb if you start with a neurological examination
- Use appropriate language when describing an examination to a patient or appropriate technical and anatomical terms when describing to a medical professional
- Described the examination steps in clear and sufficient detail, e.g. how you would position the patient, how you would palpate, where exactly you would place the stethoscope to listen to the heart
- Describe the relevant positive and negative findings you are looking for given the clinical presentation.

Things to avoid:

- If a history component or description of an image is part of the station, not doing this in a focused manner, and within any given time limit
- An overinclusive approach to the examination – describing the examination of systems or body parts not relevant to the clinical scenario presented
- Lack of clarity and detail in description of technique
- Not reporting the findings you are seeking and their relevance to the clinical scenario
- Poor time management during the case (including ignoring the time prompts) and running out of time.

3.3. Diagnostic Formulation PAA

These scenarios predominantly assess your ability to formulate a reasoned diagnosis based on history and/or physical examination findings and/or investigations. Cases will usually involve some history taking and being given (or asking for) physical examination or investigation findings. You may be asked to tell the patient/carer or team member your diagnosis or possible diagnoses, giving your reasons.

A candidate who performs well may do the following:

- Take note of whether your task is to give your:
  - diagnosis/most likely diagnosis - give one diagnosis only

  - differential diagnoses/likely diagnoses - give a prioritised selection
- Use the specific tasks and any times allocated to guide your data-gathering process
- Seek history, physical and mental state examination findings, or investigations which are prioritised according to relevance. Avoid wasting time on searches of low relevance
- Synthesise the information you have gathered from what you have read in the candidate information, asked and found on examination or investigation results
- Avoid premature closure, 'knowing the answer', without obtaining sufficient data
- Demonstrate your ability to make a reasoned diagnostic conclusion for this particular patient.
- Clearly explain your reasoning in your diagnostic formulation
- Give the reasons for a prioritised differential diagnoses using information gathered specific to this patient
- Avoid using technical language and/or euphemisms when giving the diagnosis/differential diagnoses to the patient/carer.

Things to avoid:

- Using insufficient data/inadequate attention to other tasks (history/physical examination/investigations) to come to a diagnosis
- Not demonstrating logic and clinical reasoning in either gathering the additional data (history, examination findings and investigations) or in the diagnoses made
- Giving a long "textbook" list of possible diagnoses bearing little relationship to the particular features of the scenario
- Using technical language without plain explanation to the patient/carer
- Selecting diagnoses that are mutually exclusive (e.g. upper airway signs versus lower airway signs: tonsillitis vs pneumonia)
- Selected diagnosis is non-specific. For example:
  - "Psychosis" where the features clearly allow a diagnosis of schizophrenia
  - A euphemism e.g. "nasty growth" when a cancer is suspected
- Not providing justification/reasoning for the diagnosis.

3.4. Management/Counselling/Education PAA

These scenarios predominantly assess your ability to develop and communicate an appropriate management plan that may involve patient/carer education and counselling as well as treatment.

A candidate who performs well may do the following:

- Listen carefully to the opening statement of the patient/carer and carefully observe their behaviour and responses
- Pause and check regularly for patient/carer understanding
- Recognise clinical urgency and responds accordingly
- Aim for shared understanding and agreement/decision making
- Prioritise the information given/shared with the patient/carer, to not overwhelm them with a barrage of information
- Provide specific recommendations and advice relevant to the problem and context with reasons for the advice
- Communicate the general management plan, even if you would not be responsible for its delivery.

Things to avoid:

- Not addressing the concerns/questions/presenting problem of the patient/carer/team member
- Not using the context and setting background provided in the candidate information to tailor management advice
- Not demonstrating familiarity with tasks around breaking bad news, including showing empathy, giving time, ensuring patient/carer comfort and safety, ensuring patient understanding, involving significant others, and offering ongoing support
- Not checking for patient/carer/team member understanding of recommendations/advice
- Communicating advice in overwhelming detail
- Reliance on technical language and jargon, lack of provision of explanatory statements
- Reliance on drawing a diagram which is not clearly explained to the patient
- Advice lacks specificity. For example:
  - Too generic (e.g. “antibiotics”, “psychotropics”)
  - Overly inclusive (e.g. simultaneous/indiscriminate use of social services, psychologist, psychiatrist, crisis intervention, community services)
  - A platitude (e.g. “good diet”, “mind-body”)
  - A euphemism (e.g. “bad lump”, avoidance of use of the word “cancer” where appropriate)
- Not demonstrating familiarity with the general principles of management of common conditions:
  - Reliance on simply referring the patient to specialist services (for example “my senior/a specialist/psychologist”) without specifying the expected management is usually not satisfactory.

  - Likewise, just stating “Don’t worry you are in good hands” or “You will be well cared for” or “I will give you some relevant education material” by themselves are generally insufficient

- The treatment plan for this patient with this condition at this time is incorrect/inaccurate.