Focus on Residents: Myths, Facts, and FAQs about the New ABR Diagnostic Radiology Core Exam

By Duane G. Mezwa, MD, ABR trustee

The ABR’s new diagnostic radiology “Exam of the Future” is almost here! The first administration of the Core Exam—for residents who began their training in 2010—will be offered in Chicago and Tucson on September 30-October 1, 2013, and again on October 2-3, 2013.

Understandably, resident’s taking the new exam for the first time are nervous and aren’t quite sure what to expect. In this article, we’ll try to dispel some “myths” that seem to be floating around in cyberspace and answer some frequently asked questions that we’ve heard. Please remember that the best source of reliable information is always firsthand. You can find answers to most of your questions, as well as numerous study aids, on the ABR website at www.theabr.org. If you can’t find an answer there, please give us a call at 520-790-2900. We want to help you!

Myths and Facts

Myth: The passing rate for the radiology exams is a mystery.

Fact: Passing rates for the ABR’s initial certification exam in all three disciplines have been published on the ABR’s website for a number of years, as well as printed in our Annual Report. To find a history of diagnostic radiology passing rates for the past five years, go to http://www.theabr.org/ic-dr-score.

Myth: No one seems to know how the new Core Exam will be graded. It’s easy. The ABR will just fail the bottom 20 percent.

Fact: The ABR DOES NOT require that any specific percentage or number of candidates must pass or fail. The ABR has supported criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced examination result interpretations for many years. Criterion-referenced interpretations compare performance to a specified content mastery criterion, while norm-referenced interpretations compare an examinee’s performance to that of other examinees (grading “on the curve”). Passing the ABR exams depends on the level of content mastery of each individual, and not on the performance of the other examinees in the group.

Myth: It’s pretty obvious that the solution to the “recalls issue” is to create a new Core Exam every year. Then, used exam forms could be distributed to all candidates to help them prepare for the next exam.

Fact: While this may seem logical, releasing all items on previous exam forms is impractical for three main reasons:
• High-quality questions that have performed well on previous exams add stability and predictability to the performance of a new exam when re-used with a mix of newly written questions.
• Poor performance of new items would be more likely to result in the need to delete questions during scoring; deleting items could lead to an exam form that does not conform to the exam blueprint.
• It would sacrifice the huge investment by volunteer experts who have donated their time and expertise to produce the exam items.

Myth: Board exams are just a bunch of medical facts that aren’t really relevant to current practice. The Core Exam will probably be more of the same.

Fact: Because the practice relevance of ABR examinations is very important, the ABR relies on committees of experts to validate exam content. In addition, the ABR added large-scale practice analysis surveys of practitioners in 2006. Practice analysis identifies activities that more frequently take place and are most critical to patient welfare. The ABR’s policy is to repeat its practice analysis surveys every three years and to consider the results in updating exam blueprints. From time to time, the ABR significantly revises its examination format, structure, and delivery method to improve validity—that is why the current diagnostic radiology exams are being changed. The new Core Exam will be much more image rich than the previous initial qualifying (“written”) exam, thus increasing clinical relevance.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question: If given on a different day with different questions, couldn’t a candidate’s Core Exam results also be completely different?

Answer: In recent years, the ABR has studied the reliability of all its exams, considering the levels of reliability attained and implications for false-positive and false-negative certification decisions. It has directed its volunteer committees to maintain reliabilities generally recommended for “high-stakes” examinations (.90 and above). Using previously administered items that have performed well and administering longer tests also enhances overall exam reliability by diluting the influence of poorly performing items.

Question: Since the ABR doesn’t give numerical scores, how can candidates who have to repeat part of the Core Exam maximize their preparation time?

Answer: Along with the pass/fail result, ABR score reporting has historically included performance information by category. “Written” exam reports have also included quartile information, allowing comparison of the examinee's own performance level to the entire group taking the exam. For the new Core and Certifying Exams, enhanced graphic feedback reports will be provided with information on each of the 18 categories tested on the exam. This will help examinees be aware of their personal areas of relative strength and weakness.

Question: If I don’t access every possible resource, including lists of previous exam questions, how can I hope to pass the Core Exam?

Answer: The ABR understands the need for appropriate preparation materials and guidance regarding the changes implemented in any new examination. In response, information on the ABR website.
regarding exam procedures has become more detailed, and the website also has several study aids for the Core Exam. Links to the following materials can be found at http://www.theabr.org/eof-overview:

- Study guides with content outlines and sample questions
- Exam blueprints with percentages of items to be given in the major areas of the Core Exam
- A section and printable PDF on the “ABR Exam Experience” for all types of ABR exams
- A 110-item Core Practice Exam that replicates the new Core Exam in content distribution, item types, and software interface but is useful for any case-based, image-rich ABR exam

**Question:** Why does the ABR require all candidates to sign its new Exam Security Policy before taking the Core Exam?

**Answer:** The Exam Security Policy is not new. For many years, ABR examinees have signed a statement regarding exam confidentiality as part of their application form. The purpose of the policy is to create a “level playing field” for all examinees taking the Core Exam, as well as other ABR exams, meaning that each examinee encounters each item as a novel problem to address and solve based on his or her own understanding of the content. The public has a basic right to know that board-certified professionals have truly demonstrated competency in their fields, and not just that they are good at memorization. The Exam Security Policy specifies the behaviors that are permissible and impermissible before, during, and after exams.

For more FAQs and answers regarding the Core Exam, click here.