Security of ABR Examinations

By Gary J. Becker, MD, ABR Executive director

For a number of years, some diagnostic radiology residents have had access to items recalled from ABR examinations by trainees who preceded them in their training programs. Recalled questions were viewed as “study guides,” and sharing of these questions occurred among radiation oncology residents and medical physics trainees as well. Residents argued that the “written” qualifying exams in radiology are a compilation of “random medical facts,” and in order to have any chance of passing, they needed access to recalled questions. While this latter distortion of the facts has been used as justification for unauthorized item sharing, it is also true that the ABR did not offer study guides for these exams or provide specific direction for residents to follow as they prepared. But even if sharing of recalled questions were regarded as acceptable educational activity in the past, today it cannot be regarded in the same way.

The new Core and Certifying Examinations, which are image-rich and predominantly case-based, are rooted in the practical application and synthesis of radiologic knowledge. Whereas most of the questions on the “written” qualifying (clinical and physics) examinations in diagnostic radiology have been designed to assess the candidate’s knowledge and comprehension—a level for which recall can be regarded as the way candidates demonstrate that they have mastered the material—the new Core and Certifying Examinations are different. For Core and Certifying questions to assess the candidate’s clinical reasoning as intended, they must be seen by the candidate as novel, rather than as familiar content that is simply recalled from memory. Thus, it is vital that the Core and Certifying questions not be shared. Not surprisingly, the ABR is taking all necessary steps to cause the use of recalled questions to grind to a halt.

The policy of the ABR, a Member Board of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), aims to protect the integrity of all its certification decisions, which are based in part on examination results. Only by maintaining the security of its questions can the ABR assure the public that its certification decisions reflect examinee attainment or maintenance of the requisite standard of knowledge, skill, and understanding essential to practice. Without exam security, unauthorized access to recalled questions can lead the examinee to answer questions differently than he or she would based solely on knowledge, skill, and understanding.

What is not allowed? Specifically, unauthorized access to exam content. This includes: 1) giving or receiving specific questions, answer choices, and/or supposed correct answers at any time prior to, during, or after the administration of the exam, and 2) possessing study materials in any medium during the time period of the exam. The policy applies to all ABR examinations in diagnostic radiology, radiation oncology, medical physics, and subspecialties.
So, why does there seem to be a sudden change in the ABR’s exam security policy? Rest assured that the ABR has never authorized access to memorized questions from its examinations. However, for several reasons, we are now more determined to communicate the policy and to enforce it.

First, sharing test questions results in additional time and expense incurred by the ABR, which ultimately causes an increase in fees. In the past two years, as we have been preparing the future computer-based Core and Certifying Examinations in diagnostic radiology, expenses have sky-rocketed because it has been necessary to continue developing and delivering the current examinations simultaneously. All this work has more than doubled the ABR’s volunteer committee effort and has required more staff support, technology development for the ABR’s new item-banking system, and the building of test centers in Chicago and Tucson.

Second, if items on our new Core and Certifying Examinations become exposed through unauthorized item sharing, the ABR will have to replace them with new items. We have kept our item writers and committee members quite busy as it is, and we are not certain that they could produce exam questions at a pace that is adequate to mitigate the damaging effects of question sharing. In addition, ABR psychometricians determine how well individual examination items perform; those that perform well are used again, and those that do not are deleted from the item “pool.” Reusing items is beneficial because it decreases the likelihood of poorly performing items having to be dropped from scoring, and it allows “equating” of exams, so that the same level of performance is required to pass each subsequent exam. This quality assurance process would not be possible if exam content were totally new for every exam.

Third, sharing recalled questions evidences unprofessional behavior on the part of the test taker. It violates the public’s trust that the candidate has demonstrated competence in professionalism as well as practice proficiency. The public has a right to expect that board-certified physicians pass their examinations because they are knowledgeable and competent, not because of inappropriate access to ABR test questions. The public would not choose to go to a physician if they knew that his or her certification had been based on unauthorized access to questions memorized for the examination.

Fourth, sharing recalled questions is unnecessary. Study guides and sample questions are now posted online and will be updated as time passes. Also, the ABR bases its exams on practice analysis surveys, which ensure that questions are designed to address the most frequent and important practice activities. By the end of 2012, the ABR plans to have a practice Core Examination posted online. This short version of the examination will give users an opportunity to become familiar with the exam interface and comfortable with the various types of questions and content.

Finally, sharing recalled questions is illegal. The questions are copyrighted intellectual property, and reproduction in any form constitutes a violation of copyright law. In recent years, the Internet has enabled more question sharing. The ABR is taking action to monitor illegal question sharing by social media and other means. Specifically prohibited are the recording and/or transmission in any form of the questions, answer choices, and/or supposed correct answers.

Potential consequences to examinees of giving or receiving recalled questions are listed below:

1. Letter of warning
2. Invalidation of examination results
3. Denial of admission to ABR examinations for a specified period
4. Notification of others, such as program director, department chair, state licensing board
5. Being judged (by the ABR) unacceptable for certification
6. Legal action for copyright violation

To begin the culture change of testing integrity in diagnostic radiology, the ABR initiated a dialogue with officers of the Association of Program Directors in Radiology (APDR) in March 2011. A communication was drafted and sent to all APDR members and chairs in April. The change has been warmly received by leaders in training programs across the country. Several program directors have developed and implemented attestation forms on which the trainee indicates that he/she has read the ABR Exam Security Policy and viewed the exam security video that was shown to Core Pilot Examinees in May 2011, and that he or she understands and will conform to the policy. Because the ABR believes this is an excellent opportunity for trainees to demonstrate professionalism, we have now made plans to implement this attestation process for all first-year residents as well as department chairs, program directors, and program coordinators. This attestation will occur online on each individual’s personal database (PDB).

Quote from the exam registration form that residents sign:

“I …understand that irregular behavior before, during or after the examination such as copying answers, sharing information, using notes, or otherwise giving or obtaining unauthorized information or aid—evidenced by observation, statistical analysis of answers, or otherwise—on any portion of the examination will ...constitute grounds for the invalidation of my examination, and may lead to my being judged unacceptable for certification by the Board. I recognize that [the] questions...are copyrighted as the sole property of the American Board of Radiology and must not be ... reproduced, in whole or in part, and that any reproduction of copyrighted material, whether from memory or otherwise, is a federal offense and that I may be liable to pay damages incurred by the Board.”

Involvement of training program faculty in the facilitation of question sharing may lead to action taken against the individual’s ABR certificate. If evidence points to systematic question sharing in a given program, the ABR may prevail upon institutional authorities to launch an investigation and report back to the ABR. The ABR may report directly to the ACGME and the RRC any program that is found to be in violation of the ABR Exam Security Policy. Finally, the ABR is requesting that the ACGME make adherence to ABMS Member Boards’ Exam Security Policies a structural component of residency program review across all specialties. Breaches, which should be regarded as failure of a program to teach the professionalism competency, ought to be grounds for program citation. Legal action may also be taken in cases of copyright violation.

In summary, the ABR is serious about exam security. The public entrusts the profession with self-regulation through the specialty board certification process. We the Boards owe the public a certification process with integrity. Consequently, the ABR will work to safeguard the integrity of its certification decisions.