

The Critical Reading Question of the MFSRH Examination

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Introduction

The Critical Reading Question (CRQ) paper is an integral component of the Membership of the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (MFSRH) Part 2 Examination [previously the Membership of the Faculty of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care (MFFP) Examination]. It usually consists of three pieces for candidates to read, with five to ten questions per piece. The marks account for 30% of the Part 2 Examination.

The CRQ paper

After each examination, candidates are asked for feedback. Comments vary from:

“Hard to know what to expect” and “? Relevance to our field” to “Very difficult”.

Some candidates question the rationale behind the exercise:

“Do not understand what knowledge is being tested ... in clinical practice ... you have CEU ... do we need to fail this exam on this.”

“How relevant CRQ are I do not know. An excellent course would be so much more relevant. The one scenario proved it – HRT – doctors do not understand it!”

A common theme is the lack of time, and yet my experience as an invigilator shows that most of the candidates finish writing with ten or more minutes to spare! The ability critically to assess current research and adapt it for use in practice (or to reject it!) is a vital tool for any clinician. Specialists in the field need to interpret the evidence for non-specialists and professions allied to medicine. In addition, patients are increasingly well informed in health care matters and will expect evaluation when the latest ‘fad’ or problem hits the headlines. Many of those who achieve the MFSRH will themselves be involved in research.

In spite of the reputation of the CRQ and the concerns of the candidates, recent marks show mean scores in the high fifties. This compares favourably with marks awarded for the Modified Essay Question (MEQ) sister paper (i.e. mean scores over the last 3 years for these two papers were 58.65 for the CRQ and 58.78 for the MEQ).

Preparation of the CRQ

The CRQ has the reputation of being difficult since ‘academics’ are involved in its preparation, and candidates believe that the questions involve a lot of reading. The questions are prepared by a CRQ group, the current members of which are all practising clinicians in family planning, and the questions are all assessed for consistency, fairness and validity. The details of the questions are informed by current best practice in educational theory and assessment practice, and in evidence-based medicine

(EBM). Questions are designed to test candidates’ knowledge of such basic exemplars of EBM as types of study, study design, participant selection, simple statistics and interpretation of study results including graphical representation – all found in any basic EBM text. The intention is to render the question understandable by the candidate and answerable by any clinician, active in family planning, who informs their practice by keeping up to date with the literature.

Preparation for the CRQ

Critical reading can be straightforward. Greenhalgh advises us first to ‘get our bearings’,¹ that is, ask what the study is about using three seminal questions:

- Why was the study done, and what clinical question were the authors addressing?
- What type of study was done?
- Was this design appropriate to the research?

To these I would add a fourth question:

- Are the authors’ conclusions justified from the study design and analysis?

Candidates *feel* ill-prepared. However, there are three example questions on the Faculty website² and I am going to release some more shortly. Career-grade and subspecialty trainees in sexual and reproductive health have critical reading as part of a module for which there are recommended study resources. Other candidates might tap into these or into formal teaching sessions.

The Faculty publishes a small reading list² and there are many critical reading and EBM texts around. Candidates should be familiar with a simple ‘statistics for the practising clinician’-type text. Candidates should identify papers published in peer-reviewed journals and perform regular critiques. Should a paper be a good one, the practising clinician should be able to explain to themselves why it is good, if it is going to inform daily practice. Courses in research methods are often very helpful; the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists offers such a course, but there are also many local ones.

My advice for candidates is as follows:

- Don’t panic because the CRQ paper might seem to cover strange territory.
- Make sure you understand the methodology of different study designs.
- Understand the ‘hierarchy of evidence’.¹
- Find a book on critical appraisal of papers that you are comfortable reading.
- Make use of the examples on the Faculty website.
- Find a local group that critically appraises papers and look out for correspondence following the publication of a paper. This often gives important clues to study design and analysis faults.

And finally remember that:

- There is sufficient time allowed in the examination to complete the CRQ paper.
- Candidates generally perform well on this paper.

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Competing interests None identified.

References

- 1 Greenhalgh T. How to read a paper: getting your bearings (deciding what the paper is about). *BMJ* 1997; **315**: 243–246.
- 2 Faculty website, section on Training & Exams (Membership Exam). www.fsrh.org.

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