

# OSPHE EXAM

## Format

Part B is an Objective Structured Public Health Examination (OSPHE). It takes the form of 6 scenarios or 'stations'. There may be a pilot station. Such a station is where we are checking whether the station can be used in future examinations. Your mark for this station will not count towards your result. It is important, however, that candidates sometimes complete the pilot station because without the information gained from this we cannot evaluate the station properly. For this reason we do not reveal which is the pilot station. Each station lasts approximately eight minutes

## Level

The OSPHE is designed as a "Show How" assessment of the candidate to apply relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes to the practice of public health. It requires candidates to show that they can integrate the theoretical and practical aspects of public health.

The standard required in the OSPHE will be that which could be reasonably expected of a public health trainee with at least two years (wte) left of service based training. The examiners will assess candidates' ability to use knowledge and skills appropriately in public health settings

## Content

The OSPHE is a test of skills and attitudes relating to every day public health issues in commonly experienced settings. You will not be required to be familiar with NHS procedures or practices.

The following skills will be tested:

- The ability to demonstrate presenting communication skills (verbal and non verbal) appropriately in typical public health settings: presenting to a person or audience.
- The ability to demonstrate listening and comprehending communication skills (verbal and non verbal) appropriately in typical public health settings: listening and responding appropriately.
- The ability to assimilate relevant information from a variety of sources and settings and using it appropriately from a public health perspective.
- The ability to demonstrate appropriate reasoning, analytical and judgement skills, giving a balanced view within public health settings.
- The ability to handle uncertainty, the unexpected, challenge and conflict appropriately.

## How to prepare

You have already demonstrated that you know how to apply your knowledge by passing Part A of the Membership examination. In the OSPHE, you must demonstrate to the examiners' satisfaction that you can apply your knowledge in practice.

**Websites:** Please use the Faculty's own website. We update it regularly and it is a reliable source of information.

We strongly recommend that you take the advice of your programme director or training advisor in preparing for this exam and remind you that the exam will be testing every day skills which can be learned in your every day work.

**Textbooks and handbooks:** We do not recommend specific textbooks and handbooks in preparation for the OSPHE. You are being assessed on your practical and communication skills, rather than on your ability to remember and recite facts.

We do not authorise or endorse any books specifically about passing the OSPHE test.

**Courses:** We are unable to monitor the quality of courses and, therefore, do not endorse any. If you decide a course would be a useful preparation, we recommend that you research its quality before you enrol.

## **What happens on the day**

You will be given full and clear directions on the day about what you have to do. There will be a full briefing to all candidates before the exam begins.

Each station lasts approximately eight minutes, and there will be approximately one minute between stations. The examination stations will be numbered clearly from 1-6 and staff will be there to help you move from station to station.

You will receive a candidate briefing pack with the full set of 6 questions. Each question will be clearly marked. You should take this pack with you to all stations; preparation and examination rooms. You may make notes on it. You will be asked to return the full set as you leave the examination suite at the end of the exam. There will also be paper in the preparation room for you to make notes on. You can take these notes with you into the examination room but you should leave them there at the end of the station.

When you enter the Examination area, you will find a series of 6 preparation booths and 6 examination booths, known as stations. Each station requires you to undertake a particular task. Some tasks will involve just reading instructions; some will involve tasks such as preparing a verbal briefing, giving a short formal talk, being interviewed by a journalist.

There may be one pilot station where we will be trialling a new scenario. You will not be told which station this is. Your result in this station will not count.

You will be required to perform all tasks. You will be told the number of the station at which you should begin in the briefing session and you will be directed to that station when you enter the Examination area. Your starting station will also be indicated by a number on your name badge given to you when you register.

Your first station will always be a preparation station where you will read the instructions for the examination station outlining what you will be required to perform at that station. You will have approximately eight minutes before entering the exam station to read the instructions. You must always read the station instructions carefully and respond appropriately. You should not assume you know what the station is about.

A bell will ring. You may then enter the exam station. There will be an examiner in each station. You will not always be required to have a conversation with the examiner; you should only direct your remarks to him or her if the instructions specifically ask you to do so. You should undertake the task as instructed.

In some stations there may be an actor who has been provided with a detailed script beforehand. In these stations the examiner will observe you and will not intervene, except in very limited circumstances.

A bell will ring after approximately 7 minutes to warn you that you are nearly out of time. Another bell will ring when the time is finished. At this point, you must stop immediately and go to the next station. If you finish before the end, you must wait inside the station but you should not speak to the examiner or the role player during this time.

You should continue in this way until you have completed all examination stations. You will then have finished the OSPHE.

Examiners will not give any feedback during OSPHE stations

## **Marking the OSPHE**

The OSPHE marking guidance in the sample OSPHE station shows the [five competency areas](#) that are covered at each and every station. The aims of the OSPHE have been rephrased to form five broad aims (the only significant change from the original four is that with the development of the OSPHE the first aim has been separated into two components). Candidates will therefore receive six independent assessments of each of the five competency areas.

For each of these six assessments for each of the five competencies the candidate will be awarded a grade between A and E, with A being excellent, B being good, C being adequate, D just below adequate, and E being poor.

If a candidate were to be awarded a C for each competency at all six stations this would indicate a pass overall. The marking structure is such that it is possible to not do well on say two of the stations and yet still pass overall by obtaining the same overall score by getting some marks higher than a C at other stations. The other requirement is that each competency area must be marked as adequate or above at half or more of the stations.

At each station there will be at least two people conducting the examination. One examiner at each station will be responsible for the marking. In addition to the candidate, there may be more than two other people in the room and these others may include examiners in training, observers participating in an audit and evaluation of the OSPHE, etc.

## **THE ROUGH GUIDE TO TAKING THE OSPHE**

**by PH trainees Abhijit Bagade and Stuart Lines**

The OSPHE (Objective Structured Public Health Examination) is the new Part B exam for membership of the Faculty of Public Health. It replaces the previous Part II membership exam and indicates the Faculty's move to a more skills-based assessment midway through training rather than an exit exam. It is intended that the OSPHE will be taken around six to

nine months after passing Part A (previously Part I), the knowledge-based assessment for membership.

The OSPHE consists of six 'stations'. A different scenario is presented to the candidate at each station. Several sittings have been organised for 2006 in order to accommodate 'the bulge' of trainees who have not taken Part II and who may be nearing their CCT dates.

The first sitting of the new OSPHE was held on Friday 3 February 2006. Twenty-three candidates sat the exam (11 in the morning and 12 in the afternoon). This article outlines the experience of two trainees from the Eastern Deanery who sat the first OSPHE. It offers their advice and tips on what to expect on the day, how to prepare and how to approach the scenarios.

## **Application procedure**

The application procedure for the first sitting was very smooth. The Faculty website offers comprehensive information on available dates and on the application procedure itself.

Application forms can be downloaded from the website. Preferred dates for sitting the exam need to be specified on the form, but there is scope for taking it earlier if you indicate that you are willing to accept a late availability place. Some candidates at the first sitting had been offered a place in the couple of weeks before the exam. Should you have a preference it may also be worth requesting either a morning or afternoon sitting.

The instructions on the website specify the standard fee (£540) to be paid with the application form; the fees are much less (£135 for the first attempt only) for those who have subscribed to the five year trainee member package. Candidates should make sure which fee applies to them before sending in the application. Surprisingly, neither the form nor instructions say who to make the cheque payable to. 'Faculty of PH' is the obvious answer, but you should check before sending the form.

The Faculty is very efficient in responding to the application form and allocating the exam date. Detailed exam instructions, including candidate number, directions to the centre and exam procedures, are sent to you around two to three weeks before the exam. This was considered to be a very well organised and comprehensive pack.

## **On the day of the OSPHE**

### **GMC reception / waiting hall**

The organisation of the exam is very professional and smooth.

The exam is held in the new GMC building at 350 Euston Road, which has a purpose-built assessment centre for the PLAB exam. The GMC building is very modern. You present yourself at the main reception and you are given a visitor's identification badge, which you hang around your neck. If you are in the morning sitting, and if you arrive early, you may well bump into examiners, so be polite to everyone you encounter! You will then be collected and taken in the lift to the first floor.

Arrive in good time! If you arrive too late you won't be admitted.

For the morning the schedule was:

09:30 – Reporting time  
09:30 – 10:30 Registration  
10:30 – 11:00 Briefing  
11:00 – 13:00 Exam

For the afternoon the schedule was:

12:00 Reporting time  
12:00 – 13:00 Registration  
13:00 – 14:15 Briefing (with lunch)  
14:15 – 16:15 Exam

You can arrive earlier and sit in the waiting area overlooking Euston Road . The waiting area is comfortable and quiet enough if you want to read through notes before the exam. The facilities include a free tea/coffee machine, water and toilets. Candidates are able to sit and chat while waiting. This may be a good idea as it could help ease nerves and will also get the mouth and tongue moving. If you wanted to, you could also do some vocal warm-up exercises here. Some people choose to read through notes quietly, but how useful this will be is up to the individual. There is a period of waiting: make the most of it – try to relax by talking, walking around etc.

### **Registration**

The candidates are taken from the waiting area to another room for the registration process where names are checked (take your passport) and you are given a slip of paper with your name and candidate number, which you put into the plastic badge wallet around your neck.

While waiting here you will be taken to a locker room where you leave coats and bags. All belongings are to be kept in the lockers, including pens and pencils. You are not allowed to take anything with you into the exam except the locker key. You can keep any amount of luggage in the secure locker room and the valuables go into the locker. If in any doubt you can ask any of the GMC or Faculty staff who will be around and are constantly helpful.

### **OSPHE briefing**

From the registration room, where there is also water, and tea and coffee machines, you will be taken to the next door room for the briefing. All 12 candidates sit in rows of four and each seat has a laminated instruction sheet placed on it. You are then taken through this sheet by the Faculty representative and can ask questions. They explain how the exam will be conducted and show you the floor plan of the exam rooms and how you move around. The briefing only takes a few minutes and you are then left to wait.

You will also be given details of the marking schedule – that you need to secure adequate or above marks for each competency in at least three stations. Each of the five competencies is assessed over the six stations. The pass mark overall was 6.0 out of 10. For candidates in the first sitting this was the first time that the marking schedule had been outlined; it would have been preferable to know this earlier. Some information about the marking is now available on the Faculty website under ‘Guidance for candidates: Marking the OSPHE’.

In the afternoon session this is where you will be given lunch if you have requested it. You are not allowed to bring your own food because of GMC regulations. A word or warning –

there may be lots of food available but don't be tempted to eat too much! In the morning session candidates ate bananas or cereal bars, which they had brought with them and sipped water while waiting. This will also be the last chance to go to the toilet, as there will be no opportunity to do so during the exam.

## **The exam**

### **The Exam Circuit**

Around five to ten minutes before the exam is due to start you will be lined up in candidate number order and given your own 'candidate preparation pack'. This is a collection of all six scenarios in a file with dividers marking the number of the station from one to six. You take this pack with you around the exam circuit and are able to mark it and make notes on it (but it must be left behind at the end of the exam).

Although each preparation station and each exam station have a laminated copy of the scenario for that particular station you tend not to look at them and only focus on your 'own' copy. A word of advice – the organisation is excellent overall, and the scenarios in this pack are (or should be) exactly the same as the ones in the preparation stations, but it may be worth just checking to make sure there are no pages missing, or extra ones put in, and that they are in the correct order in your pack!

The preparation pack is an excellent idea. The most important benefit is that you don't have to make notes on a separate piece of paper and waste valuable time. You can also show the maps and tables from the pack to the actor as part of your discussion during the exam.

GMC staff will then take you to the exam circuit and stand you outside the first preparation room, i.e. outside 3P if you are candidate number three. The arrangement for moving around the stations is efficient and professionally managed by the GMC staff.

While you are waiting outside the stations, black TV screens with white writing at each end of the corridor count down the seconds to the start of the exam. A recorded voice will then ask you to enter and the first six go in with their candidate preparation packs. Inside the station, the tannoy will announce when you have, 'one minute left' and then to 'leave the station' when the time is up. The second group of six are brought from the waiting room and wait in the corridor outside until the first group move out to go into the exam stations. The cycle continues until everyone completes all six stations.

We were told during the pre-exam briefing that we could refer to our notes or the briefing pack during the waiting period to revise and organise our thoughts.

### **Preparation stations**

As you enter the first preparation room you suddenly realise that this is all real. The first thing you may notice is the incredibly loud tick of the clock. Otherwise all is very quiet and cell-like.

You are confronted by a desk with paper, a clipboard, pens, pencils and a laminated preparation pack. There may also be flipchart paper and marker pens (at the first sitting there were two stations with flipchart paper – one was clearly for optional use and one appeared to

require you to use it). The briefing beforehand stated that the use of flipcharts would be optional. You have to leave the pens / markers, etc. in the preparation room for the others to use.

The preparation material is from one to five pages long. The information and material for five stations was appropriate. For one of the stations the preparation material was confusing and not easy to understand, rather than it being lengthy. In one of the stations the scenario was probably too clinical and the role we had to play was thought to be irrelevant for PH practitioners.

Eight minutes of preparation time passes quickly. If you want to use the flip chart, start writing on it simultaneously as you read your material.

There should be a sufficient supply of pens on the desk but, bearing in mind it is human nature to always hold a pen and take it with you, you may find that, towards the end of the circuit, there could be less pens available. Candidates should immediately ask GMC staff outside the exam rooms for pens, water or any other thing they need. The staff will provide you with what you need straight away.

There is water available - either a small water bottle or a water cooler and some plastic cups. The water bottle is a small one so it can be empty when you go into the station. There were not enough clean cups in some stations. Towards the end of the circuit your mouth may be getting very dry, so sips of water are a good idea.

There is also a clock in the preparation station – a very small table clock or one on the wall, it may or may not be easily visible when you are sitting at the preparation table.

After seven minutes a recorded voice will announce that there is one minute remaining. After this it will then ask you to leave the room. You then leave and a member of staff directs you to the examination room for this station, which is usually the next room. You look at the black and white screen at the end of the corridor and watch it count down the seconds until you go in. There is a minute gap between the preparation and examination rooms and you may be waiting in the corridor for anything between 50 and 20 seconds. The recorded announcement then asks you to enter the next room.

### **Exam stations**

Upon entering the exam room you are greeted by the examiner who may then check your name and candidate number. They will then introduce you to the role player and also to the observer if present. They may also assist you in putting up your flipchart paper if you are using it.

The examiner may, but not always, introduce the scenario to you, starting with a standard introduction of, “Imagine you are ...” However, your cue may only be, “This is the chief executive of X – you can start now.” Some actors then start the conversation, but most of them wait for you to start the discussion.

You are then in role. You can refer to any notes that you made either on plain paper or in your candidate pack. If you have used extra paper to make notes or the flip chart you will be asked to leave these behind at the end of that station.

The most important factors to bear in mind while in role are to remember who you are speaking to, what they want, or, more importantly, need to know, who you are in the role-

play, and to adopt the right pitch or tone. It may be useful to prepare some key introductory sentences and phrases that you could use each time and adapt as necessary. You should introduce yourself, say why you are meeting them and say what you are going to do. Further notes on this are given below under 'Some Advice'.

Almost all the actors are friendly and their behaviour is appropriate to their role. However, there was one station where we thought that the actor was a little too aggressive, which was not appropriate to the role.

The examiner or any observers (in some stations) do not participate at all and they are usually out of your line of vision. So, they do not cause any interference in your role-play.

The recorded voice will announce when you have one minute remaining. You should try to use this time to draw the discussion or presentation to a conclusion. You should again hammer home your key messages and summarise an action plan. Remember to thank (in role) the person you have been speaking to. The tannoy will then announce that you are to leave the room. Remember the pleasantries – be courteous and say goodbye to all those present.

You will then be back in the corridor and waiting for your next preparation room. The cycle thus goes on until you finish your six stations. If you are in the first group of six, after you come out of the exam station, you will be asked to wait until the minute is up and the second group of six have entered their final examination room before the GMC staff will lead you out of the exam circuit and back to the briefing room.

### **After the exam**

After you come out of the sixth exam station the preparation pack is taken away from you and you are asked to go back to the briefing or registration room.

An evaluation form is given to you to be completed and posted to an independent evaluator. Most of the candidates filled in the forms then and there. This was a one side of A4 and was not very comprehensive – mainly asking about adequacy of timings etc.

You will then be able to return to the locker room and collect your things. You are then free to go, but if you waited eight minutes then the second group of six would then join you. If you are a morning candidate the afternoon candidates will by this time be in the briefing room. Of course, no contact will be permitted with them.

## **Results**

The results will be posted to you within a week of the exam. If you have passed – well done! If you have failed you will be sent an OSPHE Feedback Request Form. You need to complete your estimated average score for each competency and send it back to the Faculty. The form will then be sent back to you with your actual average scores for each competency and overall average mark. A word of warning – you can pass each competency with a score of 6.0 or above but still fail because you did not demonstrate a particular competency well enough in three or more stations. Feedback on individual stations is not given.

## **Some Advice**

Here is a summary of some advice given in this article, together with some 'tips and tricks' you may find useful:

- If you have a preference, it may be worth requesting either a morning or afternoon sitting when you send in the application form. The Faculty will do their best to accommodate your preference.
- Arrive in good time for the exam. Whilst waiting try to do some vocal warm-up exercises (humming, mouth stretches, chat to other candidates).
- Do some breathing exercises to combat nerves and help with speech. These can be done before the exam as well as in each preparation station and in the waiting corridor. An easy method is – breathe in deeply for a count of five, hold for a count of 15 and exhale for a count of 10, repeated as necessary.
- Have sips of water to combat a dry mouth, but not too much if you are someone who needs the toilet frequently.
- It may be worth checking your candidate preparation pack to make sure there are no pages missing, or extra ones put in, and that they are in the correct order in your pack!
- Think about how you would use the props you are given – how you would use a flipchart in eight minutes (you might want to transcribe your framework on to it) and how you might refer to tables, maps, graphs and references (the role player should have their own copy of all of these and so you should be able to refer to them relatively easily).
- Remember that you are in role. You must try to embrace, relish and enjoy the part you are playing in order to let it flow as naturally as possible. You should aim to engage, enthuse and even entertain to a degree in order to get your message across.
- Try to switch off totally once you are out of one exam station and switch on for a fresh start in the next preparation station.
- General preparation for the exam: Use DH and NHS documents of all important PH issues to prepare for this exam in addition to the daily work projects in your department. Practice reading and understanding four to five pages of these documents in eight minutes and then practice presenting each document separately to a Chief Exec, PEC Chair, PH manager, members of the public and as a Media interview or press release in three to four minutes.
- Consider using a generic framework that can be adapted for most situations. A couple of very simple ones are as follows:
  - **INTROS**
    - I** – introduce yourself/scenario; **impact** and the big picture
    - N** – what the audience **needs** to know
    - T** – **timings** – say how long you will talk for
    - R** – **responses** – say how you will take questions
    - O** – **outline** what you are going to say
    - S** – **say** three to four key points and then **summarise**
  - **Three Rs**
    - Regret – express regret for an event that has happened
    - Reasons – state why it happened
    - Response – say what you are going to do about it

## Overview

The OSPHE does seem to be an appropriate method of examination as it does attempt to reflect what public health practitioners actually do. Of course, the scenarios are still artificial, but the OSPHE appears to be an improvement over the old Part II in respect of attempting to replicate what might be encountered in the real world. However, there are some drawbacks. For example, the scenarios cannot take account of long-established relationships that will exist in the real world and you will inevitably be 'starting from scratch' with the role player who is being your chief executive for example.

This is intended to be an objective exam and hopefully the Faculty has a robust system in place to make sure that it is assessed objectively. However, it may be appropriate to consider making the marking more robust by having a second examiner present and/or using video or tape recordings of each exam. This would also help hugely in giving feedback to those who fail. It is not clear whether the role player, who may be a public health professional and not a professional actor, would discuss the marking with the examiner after the candidate has left the room. It is felt that further clarification from the Faculty on the objectivity of the marking would be beneficial, as would more detailed feedback.

In conclusion, the exam is conducted in a very professional manner, the arrangements are excellent and, most importantly, it represents a huge step in the right direction.