

# My Personal Encounter with the FRCS (Orthopaedics) Examination

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When I was first approached to write about my recent encounter with the FRCS (Ortho) exam, it took me by surprise. I was initially flattered that anyone actually wanted to read about my experience. The elation passed rather quickly, and before I knew it, I came to the realization that I was not much of a writer. Now that I remember, my English teacher in school was never too impressed with my literary skills. That aside, I still had that big question to answer; so how did I survive the exam?

I do not believe there is a fixed set of techniques that will guarantee a pass. Having been through medical school, all of us are probably veterans at taking exams. Everyone has their own methods that have served them well through the years. I definitely do not have the necessary qualifications to pen a survival guide for the FRCS (Ortho) exam. Hence, this will not be a self-help guide (in other words, do not hold me liable for the following content). Instead, let me share with you my experience. If you do find a useful tip, then let that be an added bonus. Otherwise, I hope my writings will be a light-hearted reminder of this milestone in my Orthopaedic training.

## **It Is Never Too Early To Start**

My first encounter with the exam was in 2003 when I helped with the organizing work. That year, I experienced first-hand what the exam was all about. I was impressed by some of the candidates; they were slick and smooth with their delivery, and impressive with the discussion. On the other hand, others had a more difficult time. It dawned upon me that this exam needed some serious hard work, and I vowed to work on it and start my preparations early.

Well, at least that was the original plan. I must confess that I was soon preoccupied with the many other events going on in my work and social schedule (alright, so I procrastinated a lot). Before I knew it, the exam date has sneaked up upon me and I was left with three (maybe four) months to get my act together. If you are one of those constant workers that have relentlessly scored above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for all your OITE exams, this will not be a major cause for concern. But I was not, and so I panicked. That is not necessarily a bad thing because I tend to be more efficient when working towards a dateline. It was good fortune that I had done some reading through the years of training, and that helped lighten my spirits. Soon after the initial wave of despair and resignation, I gathered myself and got things going. It was not long after I started working diligently on my revisions that I realized that perhaps I should have started much earlier.

## **Let's Set a Time Table**

This was the easiest part of all the preparatory work. Given that there is so little time left, setting up the timetable was a breeze; just pack everything in! I decided to take a week off from work to psyche myself up, and to set the mood right for the mammoth tasks ahead. The week was also crucial for me to overcome the inertia of lethargy and get the momentum going.

Throughout the 3 years of training, I have accumulated stacks of notes. Some of my own, others internalized to my personal collection from various sources (usually without the owner's permission). I had to take some time to sort out these notes, deciding which will come into handy and which will end up in the bin. I found it difficult to read from thick volumes of text; before I get to the end of a chapter, I would have forgotten the start of it. Instead, I relied on a good set of notes that crystallized my thoughts, and referred to reference texts liberally to reinforce my understanding. Personally, I found this approach more directed and more rewarding.

It was difficult to concentrate on my reading and juggle with work at the same time. So I took another month off work just before the exam to focus and consolidate my thoughts. I found this arrangement worked best for me.

## **Where Shall I Start?**

I stared at my prized collection of books and notes and I was left in a daze. I was lost and I had no idea where to start.

The scope of this exam was indeed daunting and the field of Orthopaedics has developed so many areas of subspecialty interests. I sat down with my trusted copy of Roger Dee, and I scanned through it to get a feel of the breadth. I also took reference from the very exhaustive syllabus list from the Hong Kong University. That syllabus could have been summarized with one single word; everything. Yes, that is depressing.

I had a recurrent nightmare before this exam. In this horrific vision, I see myself sitting most uncomfortably in front of the examiners and babbling like an incoherent fool. After all, there is so much to know, and how can I know it all? What about the bits that "I don't even that I don't know" (the stuff that I am not even aware that it exists)? Let's face the facts; I cannot possibly be an expert in all aspects of Orthopaedics (although I am sure some "I know-it-all" trainees will beg to differ).

As the weeks went by, I realized that this examination was to certify our competence as general Orthopaedic surgeons; yes, GENERAL Orthopaedic surgeons. That made

a great deal of difference in my approach to the syllabus. Although the breadth of the scope has not altered, I had a better perspective of the depth of understanding needed. I may not practice corrective surgery for idiopathic adolescent scoliosis, but at least I know what are the red flags to look out for when I make the initial assessment. It is definitely a bonus if you know the details of where and how to place that crucial hook to optimize the correction; it reflects well on you, and lets you score all those brownie points with the examiners. But given that I am a mere mortal (and not a clever one at that), I decided to stick with the basics, and know them well. After all, I think it is unforgivable to know a great deal about a few issues, but nothing else about the rest

So let's stay focussed. They are not looking for subspecialty Orthopaedics experts. Instead, show them that you are a surgeon with a firm grounding in the basic principles of Orthopaedics, and that you will practice safe medicine.

As for the nightmares, do not worry. They usually fade gradually and eventually, I slept well again (about a month after the exams had passed).

### **It's Back to the Basics**

This exam focuses on the basics; so do not neglect the history taking and the physical examination. In the last few years, I have gotten so efficient at arriving at a diagnosis based on the Xrays even before setting eyes on the patient. This is definite bad practice for the exam. It's time to go back to the good old medical school days and work through the clinical problem systematically.

At this stage of training, we should be able to progress smoothly through the various stages of history taking, clinical examination, investigations and diagnosis. That sounds easy, right? Well you should try it out, and you will know how much you have taken the basics for granted. As far as I can remember, all previous difficulties and failures in the past years have been with the clinical cases. You can be the resident expert at managing that revision total knee replacement, bursting with knowledge about the options of bone grafting and stemmed fixation. But if you are wobbly with the basic foundation, you will never progress that far as to discuss the management of the case. It would be such a shame to know so much and yet not be able to tell.

The last you want to hear from the examiners are remarks about their medical students doing better than you at history taking and physical examination. So make a conscious effort and work on it.

### **Study with Someone**

I have never been an advocate of group study. I have always thought that studying is a private venture best done alone. During the preparation for this exam, I discovered the many beauties of studying with someone.

Studying with someone helps you stay on course, and it covers the blind spots. It is easy to get sidetracked and lost in the heaps of information. When you get too fixated on a topic, your partner can help pull you back on track. Remember the blind spots of "I don't even know that I don't know"? Your partner can point these out to you so that it will work you into a frenzy and make you work even harder.

Studying with someone makes you aware. Let's admit it, you cannot be right all the time. Discussing a topic will definitely add depth to your understanding, and it provides an alternative viewpoint. Just make sure that at least one of you has the facts right, so you will not end up with the blind leading the blind.

Studying with someone helps with the viva skills. I am not a gifted speaker. All the mock viva sessions allowed me to formulate and articulate my thoughts on the spot. I have often muttered something out loud, and promptly ended up biting my lip and cursing myself. Isn't it amazing how that flash of brilliance that stuck moments ago sounded so much better in the head, and it just did not come out the right way? It takes practice to speak confidently in public. So practice it with someone.

Studying with someone is reassuring. The preparation for the exams was definite hard work, and it can get depressing and lonely at times. It is always comforting to know you are not alone, and that the next guy knows as much (or as little) as you do.

### **So go forth and find that special someone.**

### **Let's Organize a Crash Course**

There are always individuals amongst us that are exceptionally gifted at organizing tutorials. And we do have very enthusiastic teachers who are most obliging. I remember going around different hospitals attending some of these tutorials, and they were excellent. The tutors are all experts in their own field and they can crystallize their thoughts and understandings in these short sessions. Some of the insight that they provided proved to be most valuable in the exam.

Put all these sessions together and you effectively have a crash course in Orthopaedics. Just remember that you will still need some time to do your homework and reading.

### **Communication is the Key**

This exam attempts to assess your knowledge and competence in a few days. Needless to say, effective communication is the key.

Most questions I encountered were open ended enough to give me enough breathing room to explore the topics. So I took the opportunities and discussed around the issues I was comfortable with, staying away from unfamiliar territories. Telling them what you know scores points. This is not the time to confess and volunteer your ignorance (there will be ample opportunities for you to do that throughout the exam).

On the other hand, some questions were quite specific. In these instances, go straight to the point and do not beat around the bush. So if you know the answer, volunteer it promptly and do not let them drag it out of you. But if you do not have a clue, perhaps it is easier to confess so that you can hopefully move on to other more familiar grounds. The examiners know their stuff, and I do not think you can bluff your way through.

I did make a conscious effort to keep talking; silence can be deafening during the exam. Having said that, do not fall into the habit of muttering something off the top of your head just to fill the void. From my personal experience, it

will invariably turn out to be something I will regret later.

### **Practice, Practice and Practice**

History, physical examination, investigations, diagnosis and treatment; I am sure you must have done this a hundred times. Now is the time to show the examiners that you have done it a thousand times over! Demonstrate your smooth and thorough techniques to convince them you deserve the pass. You must practice your routine often enough or it will show.

You definitely do not want to irritate the examiners till they make remarks like "that is not how you measure the true limb length!" or "surely you must know about the Trendelenburg test?" You have heard of immediate failures during driving tests; these situations are probably the FRCS (Ortho) equivalents.

### **They are Trying to Help You**

I was very skeptical about this but it is true. You will make mistakes along the way, and the examiners always provide opportunities for you to redeem yourself. Pay attention to the visual and verbal hints; your remark that caused them to raise their eyebrows, their request for you to repeat or rephrase your last point. You have probably said something that attracted their attention in a bad way. So be humble, take the hint and work your way back; do not keep digging yourself into a hole you cannot climb out of.

### **Stand Your Ground**

Many issues in Orthopaedics are carved in stone, but even more are in various shades of grey. So it is possible to have different viewpoints to the same problem. If you are up to date with your reading, then go ahead and discuss the thorny issues. Stand your ground when you are challenged. As long as you demonstrate that your argument is sound and backed by conventional wisdom, it will be fine (or at least you hope so).

Be firm, but not over-bearing. The exam is not the best time to prove a point. Insisting on your argument and degenerating into a shouting match with the examiners will

definitely leave an unpleasant after-taste (no matter how correct you may be).

It is a delicate balance between deciding when to stand your ground or when to back off. I am sure you will find the answer in your diplomatic inner self.

### **Lights, Camera, and Action**

After all the gut wrenching preparatory work in the preceding weeks, it has come to the final showdown. Put aside those recurring nightmares, those idiopathic runs of tachycardia and night sweats, and your waning appetite in food (and all else that life has to offer). Your most eagerly awaited moment has arrived.

Practice your usual rituals before the big day; drink that herbal tonic, pray to your favourite gods, and wear your good luck charms. Most importantly, clear your mind and have a good night sleep (if you can). I am sure all the years in training have equipped you with ample knowledge to sail through this hurdle unscathed. Do not worry if you feel you have done sub-optimally for one station, because there is more to come and you can make a difference with your later performance (not to mention that there is little you can do about spilled milk).

Look the bright side, at least it is short performance and it will be over in a few days' time.

### **At the End of It All...**

Before I knew it, the exam was over; and I survived it. To be honest, I was most relieved. I have gone through weeks and months of tough preparatory work, countless sleepless nights, and many nerve-wrecking moments. This exam was definitely a memorable experience. It is one of the many milestones that I am sure we will all pass through in our career in Orthopaedic Surgery.

I would not say the whole affair was a milk run, neither was it an insurmountable task. It just needed some planning, a lot of hard work, plus a pinch of good fortune.

At the end of it all, I was left with a sense of achievement, and a feeling of satisfaction. I am certain you will find your experience with the exam just as enriching and fulfilling.