

Correspondence

Multiple choice questions

Dear sir,

I have read with great interest the excellent letter of Dr. Shabih Manzar about writing fair multiple choice questions (MCQs).¹ I agree with the majority of Dr. Manzar's ideas and I see them as real solutions for MCQ problems facing us in our schools.² However, I have one comment on Dr. Manzar's tips and also I would like to add extra tips for further improvement of MCQs. The use of one-worded stems will facilitate testing several aspects of the subject in question rather than a detailed stem or a scenario, for example, under a stem of 'Diabetes Mellitus' we can include items asking about etiology, investigation, therapy and so on, instead of a stem like "The etiological associations of diabetes". The detailed stems may be more appropriate for postgraduate students. Sometimes the much-detailed scenario may much decrease the time allocated for answering (as most of the time goes to reading the questions). This will affect the students performance in the examination.

Here are some extra tips to obtain fair MCQs. Tip 1. Some teachers complain of difficulty of writing 5 constructed items in some important topics (especially for undergraduates). They either omit these topics or add one or 2 defected items. Why not use 2 or 3 items in some questions rather than 5? Tip 2. Prepare the MCQs at a reasonable time before the examination date. Hurrying will not construct good MCQs. Also, meticulous proof reading is required as typing errors are a rich source for frustrations among the examinees, and time wastage in the examination room. Tip 3. For schools depending on the MCQs banks there is a need for frequent updating of questions. Thus any errors or defects can be corrected whenever noticed. Also we all know that some students may smuggle one MCQ paper, or memorize the questions and pass it onto the next generation! Tip 4. Examiners should meet before the examination to confirm topics, number, content, construction, variability and accepted or

agreed answers for MCQs. After the examination critical views from both students and teachers are useful. In summary, the MCQ examination should not be one-man task (where the Head of Department collects questions from his fellows and pass them to the printer!). Tip 5: Cheating is not a rare problem among medical students. Even more, in MCQs it is easier than essay examinations (as one only needs to copy one letter, or tick). A useful solution is to type MCQs in different orders by using 3 or more versions of the same MCQ papers.³

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Reply from the Author

I appreciate the professional way in which Dr. Ahmed acknowledged my previous Letter to the Editor on the topic of MCQs. I fully agree with his comments and additional tips. I think in medical education a continuous search for better methods of education and evaluation should go on, and we as academicians should continue to contribute whatever is possible in our circumstances.

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References

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2. Ahmed AM. Multiple choice questions in Sudan medical schools: Teachers views. Saudi Med J 2000; 21: 398-399.
3. Deleu D. Multiple choice questions in Medical schools. Saudi Med J 2000; 21: 1093-1094.