

The last exam

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The autumn sun had lost its summer fierceness but it was still a hot afternoon in Chicago. I pushed the door leading from the clinic building wide open, making room for my rolling suitcase to come along behind me. My shirt was damp since the small classroom in which I had conducted the last of the day's oral exams had not been air-conditioned. I was glad that I was the examiner and not the candidate.

Trying to make a good impression, the young man I was examining kept his suit jacket on while mine was draped over the back of my chair. As we discussed a series of patient vignettes, I watched the tiny beads of sweat form on his forehead and outline his upper lip. At one point he loosened his tie, then pulled it tight again. Between the heat and the stress of the exam, I guessed that his shirt and underwear were likely wetter than mine.

Fortunately, he was bright and well-prepared, giving good discussions of each of the patient vignettes I had presented to him. At times he stared blankly out of the window while answering questions, as if he were all alone in the room. Outside, the last few leaves of summer, yellow with age, still clung steadfastly to their branches, but I doubted that he noticed. By the end of the hour, it was an easy decision to assign him a passing grade. I hoped he had done as well in his other exam hours. I was sure we were both glad when the session was over.

I moved quickly across the wide sidewalk, weaving through the late afternoon crowd of people rushing in different directions, clutching my jacket in my free hand. My friend Will stood near a yellow cab, holding the back door open.

The driver jumped out of his side of the car and was heading toward the back. I left the suitcase for him by the trunk, slipped on my jacket, and followed Will into the back seat.

For the last 2 days I had been an examiner for the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. The candidates I examined were seeking certification in Neurology. Each hour was an intense experience—so much was riding on the outcome. The candidates' awareness that only 70% would pass intensified their stress. Being an examiner was demanding, too. I had only 1 hour to

assess each candidate's knowledge and skill. I had to be careful not to squander time quizzing in areas where knowledge was deficient but instead search out areas of strength.

During a typical hour, the candidate was assessed by 2 examiners. My last exam in Chicago was one of those rare exceptions. One examiner had to make a tight plane connection and our team director asked me to be a solo examiner the last hour.

I had flown to Chicago with Will, the chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at our university. Our flight home was in the early evening and we'd planned to leave downtown Chicago in the mid-afternoon. Since my team was short examiners, I needed to work the last hour while Will was off.

"I'll get us a cab," he had said over lunch, "so by the time you get finished we'll be ready to leave for the airport."

While the driver lifted my suitcase into the trunk of the car, I began thinking about the events of the past 2 days. As a new young chairman of an academic department of neurology, I had already had concerns about the validity and reliability of the oral examination process. The test was not standardized. Candidates were observed while carrying out examinations of patients with various neurologic problems. These might be straightforward, such as migraine or epilepsy, or much more complex, such as patients with an unusual muscular dystrophy or neuropathy. Other hours dealt with neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, and clinical vignettes. The questions often reflected the interests of the examiners and could vary from easy to difficult. And above all, the exam venue, with 2 and sometimes 3 examiners per candidate, created stress for the candidates that affected their performances to varying degrees.

The notion that a computerized exam might be a fairer and more reliable way to test candidates began to evolve many years later. During the period when I was a director of the Board, there were numerous discussions regarding the need for more standardization of the certifying exams. This, coupled with the increasing logistic difficulties and cost of staging the oral exams, prompted the development of the current computerized exams.

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I had just slammed the taxi door shut when a young man, neatly dressed in a dark gray suit, knocked on the window. I rolled it down. He had the worried look of a man facing a crisis.

"Are you going to the airport?" he asked, short of breath, his pleading eyes fixed on me. "I'm afraid I'm going to miss my flight."

I opened the door and moved over to the middle of the back seat. "Sure, hop in," I said.

He dropped his duffel bag on the floor, loosened his tie, undid the top button of his shirt, and leaned into the back of the seat. His shoulders sagged as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He looked as if he had just finished a marathon.

"How'd your day go?" he asked, looking at me.

"Okay," I answered. Will nodded his head.

"Man, those exams were really hard," our new companion said.

I nodded my head again, beginning to feel a little uneasy.

"I thought the patients I had to examine were pretty straightforward," the young man continued, "but the questions from the examiners got pretty detailed. And the sessions on anatomy and physiology were pretty tough, too. So were the patient vignettes." Then, after a momentary pause, he added, "So how were the patients you had to examine?"

"Well, actually, we weren't examined today," I said, continuing to feel uncomfortable. "We were both examiners."

The young man was unfazed. "Wow, that must be interesting."

My discomfort was complete. "Yes, it is." I paused before saying, "You know, I examined you the last hour."

For a long moment there was complete silence, except for the honking of a horn nearby and the soft Spanish music coming from the car radio. Our cab weaved deftly between the expressway lanes.

Turning toward me, the young man leaned forward and looked at me carefully. At first his eyes fixed on my face, then shifted to my jacket and down to my trousers and shoes, and back to my face. I could guess his thoughts. This is crazy, I was sure he was thinking. I've never seen this guy before. He's got to be making it up.

"That can't be," he said, cautiously. "I'd remember."

I was equally amazed. Here was a well-trained neurologist, schooled in the art of observation, yet unable to recognize the man who had examined him in the previous hour.

"Are you sure you don't remember me?" I asked. "We were all alone. Among other things, we talked about the effects of vitamin B12 deficiency on the nervous system."

"No," he answered, "I don't remember the discussion." He looked confused. After a pause, he added, "And I don't remember you." His forehead wrinkled as he stared out the window. "In fact, now that I think about it, I don't remember anything that happened the last hour. I can't believe it."

"What time is your flight?" Will asked. I was relieved at his interruption.

"It's in an hour," he answered. "It's the last flight to Iowa City."

"I think you'll make it," Will said. "We're closing in on the airport."

The conversation lapsed; the sound of Spanish music filled the empty space surrounding us.

Long after the young man had dashed off to a distant ticket counter in the airport, Will asked, "Did you really exam him?"

I nodded my head.

The last Part 2 oral certifying examination in Neurology was given by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology on September 22, 2012. All future certifying examinations will be computerized.

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