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Vaulting over the MRCP (UK) part I hurdle—twice over

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The completion of internship and the subsequent achievement of full registration with the medical council signals the start of the climb up the postgraduate ladder. To those of us on the lowest rung of the medical hierarchy, this meant that the time for intense soul searching had arrived and we had to contemplate seriously the direction of our future careers. So it was with me in September 1982 when having just completed my preregistration year in the professorial surgical and medical units at the General Hospital, Colombo, I had to decide between throwing in my lot with the down to earth scalpel wielders or joining the high brow medical wizards. Well, having chosen the latter course the MRCP (UK) part I loomed ahead on the horizon as my immediate target.

According to the regulations of the local postgraduate institute of medicine I was ineligible to appear for the MRCP (UK) part I under the guise of the MD part I scheduled for 10 February 1983 in Colombo. (The MRCP (UK) part I paper is lent by the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom to the institute on an "agency" basis.) Ironically, however, I was eligible to sit for the identical paper on the same date in the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding the fact that the prospect of exercising my neurones in the midst of an English winter was not one that would endear itself to my frontal cortex, born and bred under the equatorial climes of Colombo, I decided that come February I would be in London for part I.

Initial formalities over and while Colombo and its environs prepared to celebrate Sri Lanka's 35th anniversary of independence, I emplaned at midnight on 3 February on our national carrier Air Lanka, via Zurich to London. Having expected snow covered airfields and roads the rays of the morning sun penetrating the plane at Gatwick was a pleasant surprise.

With five days to go to the day of the exam, I was initiated into London and the English way of life by a friend with whom I put up in Surrey. Travelling from the quiet residential area to bustling London was, of course, a memorable experience, and having been shown the ropes I was able to tackle it with ease. University College was my centre and scouting around twice before the date of

the paper gave me the necessary confidence to arrive on my own an hour ahead of time on 10 February. The minutes ahead enabled me to gather my forces and prepare for battle, which in the event was tough but of manageable proportions. Having, I thought, successfully negotiated part I, I was now free to see what a cold wintry London had to offer a tropical visitor. The week left for my roaming passed just as quickly and I was soon back home in sunny humid Colombo to await the postman some day in March conveying to me what the arbiters of my fate at the royal colleges had decided. Then on 15 March, having rushed home to lunch from a busy cardiac outpatients clinic, I found an authoritative letter which confirmed that I had sailed through part I.

The period of self congratulation and nostalgia over, I wrote to the local postgraduate institute inquiring whether I would be exempt from the MRCP (UK) part I component of the MD part I (which comprises the MRCP (UK) part I and a separate paper on tropical medicine) in July. The powers that be at the institute, however, decreed that I would have no such luck and would have to take the MRCP (UK) part I once again.

Battle hardened and encouraged by February's sweet smell of success I prepared for the July hurdle. Overall, the July paper was easier than the one in February and in mid-September official confirmation of my success was received. Enriched by this unique experience of hurdling twice over the MRCP (UK) part I, I believe that my observations may help future candidates prepare their strategy for part I. Therein, dear reader, lies the excuse for this essay.

Performing a busy senior house officer's job in neurology did not leave me much time to be with my books, but I thought that three months of well planned revision would suffice. On 1 November 1982, therefore, I set out on my odyssey turning page one of *Price's Text Book of the Practice of Medicine* (which was to be my bible) bent on reading it from cover to cover right through to page 1450. I did complete this daunting task of seeming himalayan proportions on 3 February 1983, the day of my departure to London. What were my reasons for choosing Price over the equally famous American textbooks such as Cecil-Loeb or Harrison? For a British examination, I believed that an up to date British textbook such as Price, which epitomised the best of current British medicine, would be ideally suited for the purpose. Furthermore, I strongly suspect that many of the contributors to Price are on the examining board for part I.

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Essential reading

Although Price happened to be my core textbook, I supplemented my reading on the important specialties by selected reading of the acclaimed specialty texts in each subject (see appendix). Turning to the journals, the leaders and review articles in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet* are essential reading, for each article represents a concise summary of the present "state of the art" on each topic. *Medicine International's* "add on" series, too, was of great value in terms of the review articles and the practice multiple choice questions. The preparation for MRCP series run by *Hospital Update* (starting February 1980) was, I thought, of a higher standard than the actual part I itself. Hats off to Messrs Olczak, Siklos, and Tobin for their industriousness and scholarship in preparing the questions. The other journals which I found to be worth reading were the *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*, the *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and the *Medical Clinics of North America*.

What of the basic sciences, which now comprise roughly one third of the questions in part I? As the list of recommended reading would show I waded through Roitt, Lawrence, Timbury, Ellis, Campbell *et al*, Tindall *et al*, Zilva, and Pannell and have no regrets. It is useful to keep in mind that the standard of knowledge required in the basic sciences is that which is expected of a consultant in his specialty.¹ As for practice questions the plethora of such books which are now available are adequate, although a few mistakes have crept into these.

Preparing for part I a second time, I employed the same modus operandi, now emboldened with the wisdom acquired in February, success having served to confirm that my examination technique was sound. Reading Price from cover to cover a second time was a pleasure, although my copy was now misshapen and its seams virtually tearing apart. My habit of filing in various articles culled from the journals resulted in my venerable volume weighing eight kilograms.

It has been reported that the royal colleges of physicians are elitist (justifiably I think) and will admit to their ranks only the very best candidates. This may have prompted Dr Richard Smith to call the process of becoming a member of the Royal College of Physicians, a "trial by MCQ."¹

The question of whether part I is a reliable exam was posed in the same article and reliability was measured by the fact that those candidates who pass on one occasion will also pass at other times. This, of course, is virtually impossible to decide these days, since the regulations of the royal colleges explicitly prevent candidates who have been successful at part I once from sitting for it again. You may thus call the opportunity afforded to me as serendipitous, but out of this serendipity now emerges a fact that serves as evidence of the reliability of the MRCP (UK) part I examination.

As I prepare now for the final part II of the membership, I am grateful to be the fortunate victim of circumstances which have enabled me to sit for part I twice. I have enjoyed preparing for both exams for it has represented both a challenge and a labour of love. I now look forward to the MRCP part II, the start of which is looming larger and brighter on my horizon as the days pass by.

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