How to do it . . .

Be an examiner

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Your own self-image may be of a person as mild as milk, and your view of an oral that it is an exploration of what the candidate knows in an endeavour to lift him up over the examination hurdle. Rest assured that to the candidate you are inevitably an ogre, the examination a confrontation, and its objective to put him down. If you have been examining for any length of time you can also be certain that distortions and misconceptions about you abound. Usually the stories originated with the reputed behaviour of someone else, but they will undoubtedly live on with you. The best you can hope for is that your reputation is of a beast, but a just beast. Because of this, though outwardly composed, the candidate must always be assumed to be uneasy and over the top of the arousal efficiency curve—that is, so tense that his performance is prone to fall off when any minute additional stress is applied—much as the performance of a failing heart does under increased load. Three things follow: make an extra effort not to be irascible, difficult, contrary, and ultimately exasperated; allow a warm-up period which can be up to 10% of the allotted time; and pose initial questions that are likely to be answered successfully by all candidates.

In the warm-up, you can (if the examination regulations permit) ask about the candidate's background, present or future intended employment, and prospects. It is then usually easy to make a *gentle* transition to a simple question. It is no use switching straight from "I knew your father well" to "Just tell me how 2-3 DPG fits into the haemoglobin molecule."

The velvet glove

All questions should in fact start by telling the candidate the particular topic on which he is going to be interrogated: "Let's talk about gas exchange in the lungs," and "Now I am going to ask you about your plans for this patient," are examples of how to orientate the mind. If a glazed expression comes over the candidate's face on hearing this preliminary you must decide quickly whether to repeat the orientation or to try another subject. Repetition usually suffices.

Now that the candidate is orientated and launched on a subject, the next point is to check on one's own expectations about his replies. Oral examinations in Britain are nearly always judged on what one might call a "floating standard"—an idea drifting about in the examiner's brain of what this examination requires in knowledge or performance or both. It is unusual for this standard to be well formulated and, though the lack of external reference points does not prevent the system from working reasonably well, it is good to keep constancy by asking the same or related questions of each batch of candidates. To do so is boring, but may expose, for example, that one or more of your questions is outside the ken of 95% of the examinees. Then it should be eliminated or at least relegated to the last part of an oral that is going well, when it becomes desirable to stretch the candidate's performance in the interests of determining his position relative to others, or because it introduces a glimmer of intellectual light into what tends to be a gloomy task. It is only in the latter stage that one can usually expect a candidate to think as he goes, so questions that require concepts rather than facts are not usually well handled. If you want to introduce them, an even more careful preliminary build-up is necessary. To take a simple example: if I want to persuade a candidate to tell me the difference between the capillary and cell membrane in the context of water and electrolyte transfer, I start by drawing the total body water diagram and getting the facts about ionic content of the extra and intracellular compartments, then—and only then—move on to the question that I want answered. This introduction may give you an idea whether it is even worth going on.

Now some simple "do's" and don'ts." Do interject a word or two of praise or reassurance if a candidate is getting things right, but don't labour the point that he is wrong unless it is necessary to head him off from committing suicide. If possible—and this is difficult—avoid even non-verbal signs that there is an error in his reply: instead, shift the ground with a positive statement such as "Very well, let's go on to . . . ." Resist the temptation to teach when things are going wrong: first of all it will lead to you talking too much (and that, if you are examining in pairs, will irritate your partner); secondly, if the candidate has not taken it in before he is certainly not going to absorb it in the circumstances of an oral. Don't interrupt a candidate's flow of answers if you can avoid it—he is almost bound to be thinking more slowly than you, and it is very easy to get out of synchronisation if he is still perseverating on one question while you are galloping ahead with another. The same thing may happen when you are speaking to him, so it is essential to go slowly and use short well-formed sentences which tell him exactly when you have finished and he can start.

Flexible formula

What I have written applies to any oral. The clinical examination is a special and complicated case. It is fair to say that no one really knows what is being tested (or, better, what the examiners draw out from it) except that it is something different from written papers or vivas across a table. Somewhat like the Duke of Wellington, who used to say he carried bits of string inside his head to knot together as occasion demanded, I have no detailed plan for the clinical. I do, however, have an outline: can the candidate show that he has taken a history and elicited the important physical findings? If so, move on; if not, go

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back and see if he can redeem himself. Can he next identify the problem? If so, move on; if not, can it be elicited from him by brief questions? Can he suggest appropriate management . . . ? And so on. I think this is only fair to the candidates and, furthermore, I believe that it is the examiner's duty to make the method of procedure clear so that the candidate's mind has the chance to run in predestined grooves which are the same as those of his interrogator.

Last of all, I must express a personal view about the candidate's appearance in vivas. I hope for conformity, cleanliness, tidiness, and eagerness because these are the virtues to which I was taught to aspire. But before consciously or unconsciously deducting marks for absence of these, we should reflect whether we share the same value systems and whether the one we have is right for the age in which we now live and exert our hierarchical powers by conducting orals.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Reed bed Sounds

There is great variety in the sounds heard from reed beds in early summer. By that time the new green reeds are two metres or more in height and the old shrivelled brown reeds are becoming inconspicuous; as they are taken and bent by water-rippling winds the resulting sound is quite different from that of the same breeze through a hawthorn hedge.

Not surprisingly, a reed bed is the usual setting for hearing the repeated, chattering, and mimetic song of the reed warbler. The progression of the concealed, singing cock through the reed bed can be followed as the reed heads move; after a while the warbler will select a reed stem and climb to the top. There, as a silhouette against the sky, the opening and closing of the bill corresponds with each phrase of harsh or musical notes; if really activated for singing the bird will rise in flight, then descend to the cover of the reeds. Hard churrs will warn its mate of an intruder such as a rat or perched kestrel, and it might be thought that the flight of a cuckoo would produce a similar reaction. Whenever I have seen a cuckoo gliding long-tailed over a reed bed, however, the resident reed warbler has given an outburst of vigorous song instead of sounds of alarm.

As reed warblers sing, coots splash and call aggressively at each other, while the delightful little grebes neigh their musical trills, although their calling fades as the summer advances. Great crested grebes make rather nasal barks, and if there are young, who often ride on the back of a parent, then their persistent food-begging cheeps can be heard. These sounds contrast with moorhens' explosive cries and the simple high-pitched song of the handsome, black-headed, male reed bunting, so often seen flying over the reeds to the willows beyond.

Marshy tussocks often conceal reed buntings' nests, while the reeds hold the cylindrical, woven nests of reed warblers, frequently over the water. Both great-crested and little grebes' nests may be floating partly on the lake, and those of coots are mostly surrounded by water. So, when the birds of the lakeside call from their nesting areas they are heard separately in their different zones, from the land herbage, through the reed beds, and to the open water beyond.—A P RADFORD (general practitioner, Brenty, Bristol).

The last tribute

I suppose as we grow older all of us can recall incidents frozen in memory like a photograph, and there is one I shall always remember, though names and faces have all gone. It was some time in the '60s, after Suez and before Vietnam, that I found myself in a Turkish ship steaming up the Narrows towards Istanbul. Nowadays I suppose you would call it a cultural cruise. The passengers were serious, elderly, and very likeable, with many Americans of like tastes, though one of them was rather less popular, being fanatically addicted to photography, cine camera in hand and a still one round the neck with wife carrying the accessories, and rather given to criticism of the British way of life. That particular morning we had had a note slipped in the cabin saying that a short service would be held as we passed the Gallipoli battlefields of world war one.

We were in the Narrows in the late afternoon and could clearly see the cemeteries—English, Australian, and Turkish—on the northern shore; it had been a glorious day and the light, turning rose colour, was fading into a golden haze. A quiet group had gathered on the after deck, passengers on one side, the padre in his vestments in the middle, and on the other the Turkish officers of the ship, all rather reminiscent of a burial at sea. I preferred to watch from the aft railing of the deck above, and was none too pleased to be rather noisily joined by this self-same American with his lady, cine camera at the ready, his lady having a still one in reserve. "Come on Mame," he said "We must not miss this"—the sort of remark I might have expected, so I feared the worst. The service proceeded, the ship barely moving, and then at a low note from the ship's siren, the officers, stiff as statues, saluted, as the priest threw a garland of flowers over the stern. Again a rather louder note from the siren, the officers marched away, and the wreath drifted out of sight into the haze as the ship gathered speed.

Suddenly I realised that my companion at the rail had been quite still with both cameras unused; he turned and gave me a strange look, part compassion, part it seemed to me, a reluctant and baffled admiration. "Funny you British," he said "You don't mind remembering when you've been licked." From that moment we were not unfriendly. True the cameras continued to work overtime, and the criticisms—probably justifiable—likewise, but to my shame, I came to find that his knowledge of photography was profound and that it was his practice to cull the mass of film he took and kept only the best.

Of this particular scene he had no record, neither had I but I remember it still, lens sharp in the mind's eye; and he was not to know that for him and his compatriots Vietnam was yet to come.—ROBERT CUTLER (dental consultant, Kingston, Surrey).

Clouds of glory

A recent contributor recalled an emotional experience he had had in an aircraft flying across a cloudy sunset, and described it as the "vision splendid." No doubt to the delight of many Australian readers, he attributed this phrase to Banjo Paterson, the popular balladist who helped to create in the late nineteenth century the image of the average Australian—alas now mainly a city dweller—as an outback man who in the course of his bush life:

". . . sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plain extended,
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars."

These lines appeared in Paterson's "Clancy of the Overflow," published in 1889; but this is unlikely to be a poem familiar to English readers, who may (or may not) know Paterson only as the author of the words of "Waltzing Matilda." Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that the "vision splendid" was used by William Wordsworth long before Paterson was born. In "Intimations of Immortality," he imagined the "trailing clouds of glory" that we bring with us from our previous abode, when we "cometh from afar" at birth, but unhappily lose after our youth.

I, too, have had my emotional experiences when gazing at some of our antipodean sunsets from aircraft. One occasion that I particularly recall was on a flight into Adelaide well above the clouds, which completely concealed the setting sun ahead of us, except where two circular holes in the black fleecy floor below showed as angry red pools like craters of active volcanoes. However, Wordsworth's other phrase, "clouds of glory," which also appears in that same poem, comes more often to my mind at the end of November in Adelaide, when all the lofty jacaranda trees, which have been a popular introduction from South America into the gardens and streets of this town, are smothered in purple blossoms, before their fernlike foliage appears. For a week or two they stir me from my usually earth-bound gaze to look upwards in delight. But perhaps the burgeoning of flowers or leaves on deciduous trees in the spring after the death of winter is always an emotional experience for most of us, and it is strange to think that it never happened in Australia before the white man brought his plants to this land of evergreen trees. Does this mean that the concept of resurrection could never have evolved here and had to be introduced along with all our food plants and many of our garden trees?—ERIC SIMS (paediatrician, Adelaide).