

## **Responses to Questionnaire Regarding Shelf Exam Use Sent to OSR Representatives on 1-20-06**

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### **Introduction**

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In January 2006 an e-mail questionnaire was sent to the OSR mailing list with the intention of assessing the use of NBME shelf exams in medical school years 1 and 2, and students' feelings regarding their utility in preparing for Step 1. 31 schools responded. Included in this document are a copy of the original survey, a brief analysis and summary of the responses, and the verbatim (de-identified) responses we received.

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### **Questionnaire and Explanatory Letter**

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OSR Reps,

We are examining the utility of NBME shelf exams vs. exams written by school faculty as a way of preparing students for Step 1, and would really like to hear other students' perspectives on the issue. If you could take a few minutes and answer some of the questions below I would greatly appreciate it.

- 1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2?
- 2) If yes, for which courses?
- 3) How much study time is given for each exam?
- 4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1?

We are interested in hearing any feedback you can give us, regardless if you answer all the questions or of how much detail you are able to give.

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## Summary of Results

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### Usage Summary for 31 Schools Responding

Topic	# of Schools	% of Schools	# of Shelf Exams Used	# of Schools	% of Schools
No Shelf	20	64.5%	0	20	64.5%
Pathology	10	32.3	1	0	0.0
Physiology	8	25.8	2	2	6.5
Microbiology	8	25.8	3	0	0.0
Pharm.	8	25.8	4	4	12.9
Biochemistry	7	22.6	5	1	3.2
Neuroscience	7	22.6	6	0	0.0
Histology	6	19.4	7	1	3.2
Anatomy	5	16.1	8	0	0.0
Behavioral Sc.	5	16.1	9	3	9.7

### General Student Reactions\*

#### General Impression:

Student Reaction to NBME Exam:	# Reporting	% of Total
Generally Positive	8	61.5%
Generally Negative	1	7.7
Mixed	3	23.1
Not Addressed	1	7.7

#### Prepares Students for Step 1:

Feelings that NBME Exams helped prepare for Step 1:	# Reporting	% of Total
Positive	10	76.9%
Negative	1	7.7
Mixed	1	7.7
Not Addressed	1	7.7

#### NBME Exams Compared to Faculty Exams:

Utility of NBME Exams vs. Faculty Exams in Preparing for Step 1:	# Reporting	% of Total
Favored NBME Exams	3	23.1%
Favored Faculty Exams	0	0.0
Mixed	1	7.7
Not Addressed	9	69.2

\* Note: The number of schools responding is larger than shown in the usage summary due to the inclusion of two programs which did not specify the exams they took, only how they were used.

## Test Administration

System	Student Comments	Number of Schools Using System	% of Total
<b>NBMEs as Finals</b>	-Too much emphasis on NBMEs in determining grades. -NBMEs provide a good source of objective feedback.	3	23.1%
<b>NBMEs in Addition to Finals</b> -Curved to class average -Counts for a % of final grade	-Frustrating to not get feedback on specific questions. -Good to get exposure to NBME-style questions before Step 1. -More time should be devoted to studying just for the NBME (as opposed to NBME in addition to faculty exam).	6	46.2
<b>Some Combination of Above</b>		1	7.7
<b>Multiple NBME Exams/Subject</b> -Take exam 3 times through year -Use the best score -Test administered following course final	-Taking test multiple times improves performance due to similarities in questions.	1	7.7
<b>Exams are Optional to Some Degree</b> -Take either/or/both micro and path -Grades don't count toward class	-Students found specific feedback from the Comprehensive Exam very useful in tailoring their study schedules for Step 1.	1	7.7
<b>Used as Remediation</b>		1	7.7

Generally, students found NBME exams useful in preparing for Step 1. Several students reported that the utility of NBME Exams could be improved through increased exposure to NBME style questions throughout the year, and through allowing increased time to study specifically for the NBME exam in the absence of faculty generated exams. Taking NBME exams also relieves the concerns expressed by some students that the faculty-prepared testing materials do not correlate very well with the material they will be expected to know for Step 1.

Among schools that did not use any NBME shelf exams, students varied between asserting that faculty-prepared exams did an adequate job of preparing students for Step 1, indicating that the faculty-prepared exams were deficient in some way, and claiming that faculty-prepared exams were superior to NBME shelf exams.

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## Responses

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**We do have NBME subject exams for just about every M1 and M2 class. These are our final exams, so we just have that final week that we take usually one exam a day. No time is really given besides that. I think most students believe that too much emphasis is placed on these exams in determining our grades. From those I spoke with, nobody believed they helped in preparing for step 1.**

We currently do NOT use the NBME subject exams for years one and two. We use block testing (three tests a semester w/ all subjects integrated) which does not lend itself to NBME exams. We have seen an improvement in Step 1 scores since implementing block testing about 5-6 years ago. Incidentally, we do use the NBME shelf exams in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4th year and our Step 2 scores are not as good as our Step 1 scores. It may be due to other factors as well.

**We use the NBME shelf exams for subjects where they are available. I don't remember which courses that included for 1st year, but for second year, I believe it was pharm, micro, pathology, and psych. It's given the day after the exam written by the school faculty. No extra study time is given. It's curved to the class, as opposed to a national average. It usually accounts for about 20% of the grade. Our teachers always insisted that the shelf exam rarely changed anyone's standing in the class. I don't know how much it helps prepare us for the Boards. I am frustrated by the fact that you never know which questions you got wrong, and the number that you do receive doesn't correlate with Board scores so that I still don't know if I did well or poorly on those exams. At the same time, it is probably good that we are getting exposure to NBME questions before the actual test.**

Thus far we really haven't used NBME shelf exams. Many faculty have a question bank that they use for exams and many write their own new questions each year. In terms of study time for exams, it is really variable. Before some finals we have a few days of study time. Other finals occur within the normal schedule and it is fit in with the lectures. Many students say that if you do well in your classes, you will do well on the boards and we consistently score above the national mean. However, many students do also study for the boards from other sources such as the Kaplan Q Bank.

**We take NBME subject exams for everything. In the first year we take biochem and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year we take shelves for everything: micro, pharm, path. Because of the timing of the shelf exams (usually right after the department final), we never really studied separately for these exams and I really don't think they did anything to help with Step 1. Generally if you do well on the department exams, you do well on the subject exams and do well on Step 1. In the third year we take shelf exams for every clerkship except family. I haven't taken step 2 but I have heard that these tests are more a test of the school curriculum than your knowledge. One of our campuses has a different program whereby the students take all the shelf exams over a few day period three times a year and they can use their best score out of those three testing sessions for their final score. Interestingly, I have heard that many questions are**

**awfully similar so taking the subject exams three times helps a lot. Also, for all students think that they're being compared only with students taking it for the first time, I'm not so sure that's a correct assumption.**

We do not use the NBME subject exams.

At our school we do not have NBME subject exams. The instructors each contribute questions pertinent to their lecture and these questions are collected and a larger exam is drawn up for each block. We do, however, take NBME shelf exams for the third and fourth years. I felt better prepared for step 2 after taking the shelf exams, than I did for step 1, and I wonder if taking the shelf exams helped. I obviously can't speak for the entire class on that one.

We use NBME exams only in the M3 year. We use faculty written exams in M1/M2, which I think students appreciate because it allows the exams to mirror more specifically the material covered during the course. I'm not sure if having the NBME exams would make us better prepared for the Step 1 exam because it would force faculty to cover certain topics more thoroughly (e.g. pharmacology), but it would certainly limit their ability to adapt their lectures each year.

We use no NBME exams during MSI-II. I had rather wished they had, as our faculty exams are really bad, using old and/or idiosyncratic questions. Our school's Step 1 has been around the national mean, perhaps increasing lately. I personally spent most of MSI-II using commercial Step 1 review books rather than rehashing faculty lectures, because I correctly assumed that a high step 1 score would be much more meaningful than pre-clinical grades. With my high step 1 score and mediocre preclinical grades, I have gotten residency interviews at nearly all the competitive programs to which I applied.

**We have the Pathology and Behavioral Science NBME exams at the very end of 2nd year. I believe they are considering soon adding Pharm to that list. They are all given with also some in-house exams (4 in all) at the very end of 2nd year. Students are given the week before off to study. Students have felt the pathology exam especially was helpful in preparing for Step 1. We have tried the anatomy NBME exam during the first year but it was not received as well.**

**We are given shelf exams in all of our courses (during 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year). In the first 2 years, we are given shelf exams in addition to departmental final exams. The shelf exams are often given the same day or within a few days of the final, meaning that students get very little (if any) time to study. Different departments have different grading criteria to ensure that students take these exams seriously. Some departments take the better score (shelf vs. department final), some have the shelf count for 10% of the final grade, while others simply mandate a minimum of the 10th percentile to avoid remediation. Since very little time is given to study for the NBME exam, this approach does not really help prepare for Step I. Although, our most recent Step 1 scores were quite impressive. In 3rd year, shelf exams are given**

**at the end of each clerkship. Depending on the clerkship, the exam can comprise from 20-40% of the clerkship grade. Since this is the only exam students prepare for during each clerkship, this seems to be more of an effective strategy for Step II.**

**The school administers shelf exams during both years. Biochemistry, Physiology, Gross Anatomy, Neuro., Micro., Immunology, Pathology, Pharmacology, and Physical Diagnosis & Clinical Integration. There is usually 2-3 days to study prior to each shelf. In general, I believe students feel the exams are helpful.**

**Yes, our school does use NBME shelf exams in the 1st and 2nd years. Anatomy, Histology, Neuroanatomy, Physiology, Microbiology, Pharmacology, Pathology. The exams are administered as our final exams. No extra study time is allowed than that would be given for a non-NBME exam. Yes, overall consensus from other students I have spoken with believe that taking the NBME course exams did help prepare for Step 1, especially b/c the NBME questions are all clinical vignettes, like in the actual boards. Our school does consistently above average for Step 1.**

No shelf exams are administered in the first two years. I and many other students feel that the departmental exams are good preparation for the USMLE Step I exam. This of course is done better in certain areas and lacking in others. Our national board averages for step I have been approx. a standard deviation above the national average for the last five years. I feel this attests to the fact that departmental tests can prepare for the boards quite well. The only 3rd/4th clerkships that utilize shelf exams are OB/Gyn and psych. I think the student body is split on the efficacy of these exams. Although, we do well on Step II and departmental testing again prepare people well. We near never get devoted time to prepare for exams. 1st and 2nd year we have an exam every Friday. 3rd / 4th year we have an exam at the end of each clerkship, typically on Friday and infrequently get Thursday afternoon off to prepare.

**We take SHELFs for Physiology, Biochem., Neuroscience, and Pharmacology (I think that's all, at least I don't remember any others). I think they helped in preparing for Step 1 in that you finally get to see how people actually trained in testing write questions and you get a better feel for what areas are truly important rather than what your department heads decided to emphasize. We usually have a week of departmental finals and then take the SHELFs on the following week (MWF kind of thing). I know some schools give a full week off to prepare. The important thing to keep in mind is that your school's comparison with the "National Average" doesn't really mean much because some programs split up the content of the curriculum differently. I know that the Biochem SHELF had a ton of material that was never even mentioned to us until Pathology for instance. I also hear that the Comprehensive Basic Sciences Assessment is supposed to be very good. Hope this helps.**

Our school only uses the shelf exams in our 3rd year of medical school to prepare for Step 2. We take the corresponding exam after each rotation block. Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? NO

I didn't know that there were any shelf exams for basic sciences, so I guess we clearly do not use them here. We do use them for clinical years in preparation for step II and I do think that they are helpful. One general comment I have is that schools differ in their approach to the basic science curriculum and step I, some schools are very specific that their goal of the basic science curriculum is to produce the highest scores and highest rates of passing the step one possible, some schools clearly state that they have no interest in step I scores whatsoever and the curriculum is selected based on what the instructors think students need to know, and most schools fall somewhere in the middle. I think the use of a standardized rather than faculty written exam will be critically dependant on where on this continuum your school falls and it may be useful for those designing the curriculum to confirm that they are all on the same page in this respect before thinking about what kind of exams are most appropriate. Ok, well that's my two cents.

- 1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? Yes.**
- 2) If yes, for which courses? At this point, I'm not sure how they do it, because my school switched over to an integrated curriculum. When I went through, though, we had subject exams for most courses. I know we took them for Biochemistry, Physiology, Pathology, and Microbiology, and I think I'm forgetting a couple.**
- 3) How much study time is given for each exam? We did not have "additional" study time. The Shelf exams were typically given as all or part of a final examination.**
- 4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? I can't necessarily speak for my classmates, but I think most of us would have preferred more NBME-style questions on our in-house exams, rather than getting a dose at the end of a course. Some of our faculty-written exams were not done in the NBME format, and I think ultimately it hurt us as test-takers. Of course, I could also make the argument that the way the curriculum and the testing schedule were structured, we were encouraged to memorize, regurgitate, and forget, which was unhelpful. I hope that has been remedied to some extent by the integrated curriculum and an increased emphasis on writing board-style questions. I think there was some resistance among the faculty to writing questions exclusively in that style - it is more difficult - but my argument would be that we all have to take the boards, which require applied knowledge. It's a simple fact. So why not prepare us for that type of exam from day one? You can still teach an excellent curriculum and teach to the boards. Anyway, that's my two cents as an MS4.**

- 1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? yes- but we only use a few during one week at the end of M2**
- 2) If yes, for which courses? Students are required to take the comprehensive exam, and then either the Micro or Path exam. Many students elect to take both the Microbiology and the Path exam that week for extra practice.**
- 3) How much study time is given for each exam? There is no real time to study that is allotted specifically for these exams, and as they are administered during a week where there are daily assessment exams (we also have a in-house Pharm exam) some students don't "study" for the exams and just use them as a review. The grades do**

**not count toward our courses. At our school they are administered the week after classes are completed for M2 and then there are 6 weeks for Board study and Step 1. Students are encouraged to use the exams to evaluate areas of weakness so they can target these areas during their board study.**

**4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? I think many students found the exams helpful in getting accustomed to Step 1 style questions and time constraints. In addition, most people found the specific feedback from the Comp Exam very useful in tailoring their study schedules for Step 1.**

We use faculty written exams during the first and second years. However we do have a Kaplan based course organized by the school for preparation for Step 1.

**1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? Yes**

**2) If yes, for which courses? histology, physiology, microbiology, pharm, path (neurology once in a while - not every year - we are still feeling our way on this one)**

**3) How much study time is given for each exam? No extra time is given for the shelf. It is considered our final exam and students are given roughly less than one week.**

**4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? yes.**

We don't use shelf exams at all in our first two years. However, we have started doing some computer-based testing in our classes to help students prepare for boards. I think the feeling right now is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? Will be implementing the new shelf exams. Our school is organ system based and could not use the older shelf exams.

2) If yes, for which courses? N/A

3) How much study time is given for each exam? Not sure what you mean. We usually have class the whole theme and then get the day off before the exam for last minute preparation. People usually begin studying at the beginning of a theme either way.

4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? Again, N/A just yet.

I think that our faculty written exams are good preparation for Step 1. I think the NBME exams in 3rd year are unhelpful with respect to Step 2 preparation and would prefer faculty exams.

1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? NO

2) If yes, for which courses? N/A

3) How much study time is given for each exam? N/A

4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? N/A

**1. Yes**

**2. Anatomy and Embryology, Biochemistry, Histology, Neuroscience, Behavioral Science, Microbiology, Pathology, Physiology, Pharmacology**



**3. Some tests we have one study day to prepare for. Other tests are given on the same days as the lecture/in-house tests on consecutive days. Our tests are given in week blocks where we usually have one or two tests per day for one week.**

**4. Students seem to like the objective feedback. It gives us something other than our professors' objectivity to judge our preparedness. Some classes are taught very well and we perform well on the NBME subject exams (i.e. Neuroscience) while other classes do not emphasize "board-material" as much (i.e. Biochemistry). The subject exams help us identify how much outside-source studying we must do to help prepare for a national exam such as Step 1.**

- 1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? No.
- 2) If yes, for which courses? NA
- 3) How much study time is given for each exam? Depends on the course, but usually at least 3 days.
- 4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? NA

I didn't even know that the NBME had shelf exams form M1 and M2... it seems like it might be a good way to prepare for the shelf exams in years 3 and 4, but then again, I think our current system works pretty well in that our Step 1 average is usually above the national average and we have about a 98% pass rate on it...

We do not use shelf exams.

- 1) Does your school use NBME subject exams in the M1 and M2? No
- 2) If yes, for which courses?
- 3) How much study time is given for each exam? Depends, usually an extra day or two (+ or - weekend), with a few days for each big test around finals
- 4) Do students feel that the subject exams help prepare them for Step 1? Yes! Generally, students feel that their classes have prepared them well for Step 1.

Our school does not use the shelf exams at all in the first two years! I think they might be used at times in the third year.

We don't use them in M1 or M2, so I can't really address the other questions.

**We only use the NBME subject exams during 1st and 2nd year, if a student fails their respective final in that subject.**