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OSCEs hints, tips and tricks for students and clinical coaches

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I was rather pleased to be asked to speak at the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) Congress 2016 on this topic. As a veterinary nursing educator for some years now, quite a large portion of my time is spent reassuring and supporting both students and clinical coaches in their roles and I certainly notice an anxiety peak in both parties as the Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE's) loom into sharp focus in the summer months.

I am not going to spend a long time droning on about the history of the OSCEs, why we have to sit them, why we don't sit other exams as an alternative to the OSCE, as that would be an incredibly easy way to fill 1800 words, but would not really be relevant. I did think that maybe I could just write out the words "perfect practice prevents poor performance" many, many times, but again, I didn't think this would be awfully helpful to all of those involved in veterinary nurse training. Suffice it to say that before a veterinary nurse can be placed on the Register of Veterinary Nurses, he/she must undertake and pass an independent assessment, and

more often than not, this will be in the form of an OSCE.

Different Awarding Bodies and Awarding Institutions may have slightly different requirements, but the cold facts are that if you want to qualify and then register as a veterinary nurse, an OSCE of some description has to be done.

And to be honest, they really aren't as dreadful as everyone likes to make out. (I will pause a while to allow the reader to find the nearest object to hurl at me with accompanying groans of "it's all very well for you, how do you know what they are like? You can't possibly remember how it felt to sit them!")

So, what qualifies me to make this bold statement? I think I can say that working both as an OSCE examiner and an OSCE exam writer has really helped de-mystify the process. I am often astounded at the poppycock that is spoken about the OSCEs and spend a large amount of time dispelling the myths and old wives' tales that surround this exam process.



Figure 1. (a, b) OSCE practice for blood sample preparation



Figure 2. OSCE practice for cleaning and preparing a kennel

One of the most important things that we can do to help ourselves as coaches and also our students is to not treat the OSCE's like they are anything out of the ordinary. It is not a set of rituals that needs a special code word to be uttered before it can be passed. There are no special powers you need to possess before you are granted the knowledge to pass them. They are simply testing the skills that you or your students will have been using for at least two or three years prior to performing them under exam conditions.

As either a student preparing to sit the OSCEs or a Clinical Coach preparing your students for an exam, there is so much you can do to increase confidence levels surrounding this exam.

And that is the key word to success here: confidence. That's the most important thing that we can give to our students when working with them. Students who are reading this, I say the same to you: confidence. It is this feeling that will allow you to undertake the exam and to feel in

control of the situation, rather than letting nerves and worry get in the way of you showing off those amazing skills that you have been honing since your first day in practice.

Students, let me ask you one question. You have been working as a student veterinary nurse for three years now, you have passed many online exams, completed over 300 practical skills, sweated over assignments and sat in class exams also. It is the day before your OSCEs and you are working a normal shift in your veterinary practice. After a busy morning surgery where you worked a full diary of nursing consultations, you are unpacking the order, and a veterinary surgeon walks past and asks you to help him blood sample a dog and at that moment the phone rings. At what point while any of that is happening do you sit down and say "I can't do this, I don't know what I should do next, and I am sure whatever I do will be wrong?"

Yes, exactly – at no point at all do you think of doing that. You prioritise your

workload and demands, triage the most important tasks and move gracefully from one task to the next.

So why then do you have a panic when you are asked to do a range of tasks in timed conditions that you have been performing for months? Hmm, I am often baffled by this.

Now, please don't think that I am mocking your worries and fears, they are real and I know that. However, I am trying to point out that by the time you are sitting your final OSCEs, you are already a competent and much respected member of a practice team. So don't let any doubts whisper in your ear that you can't do it. Because I promise you that you can.

So how do you gain this much-needed confidence? That is quite often down to each individual, but I think there are a few rules that, if followed, could certainly help to point you in the right direction:

(1) Understand that no magic is required

This is hugely important to building one's confidence regarding these tasks. You are being asked to replicate a series of skills that have been deemed essential by stakeholders in our profession. This means they are basic and fairly common tasks that you should be doing on a regular basis during your working day.

(2) There is no "Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons" (RCVS) way to do the tasks

A comment that I often hear (which makes me a little hot under the collar) is "ooh, I am sitting my final OSCEs in 3 months so I am now going to learn the RCVS way to do the tasks". There really is no RCVS way to do them. The OSCEs are written to provide marking criteria that try to eliminate any inconsistency in the marking process, and are designed to promote the teaching of "best practice". The mark sheets allow the examiner to state "yes" or "no" to each step. If there is more than one published technique, then all of these ways will be marked as acceptable. This really moves away from each individual examiner being allowed to use his/her own personal opinion to inform on a student's ability to carry out each step. Let us also remember that the RCVS are no longer an Awarding Body, and that each Awarding Body that

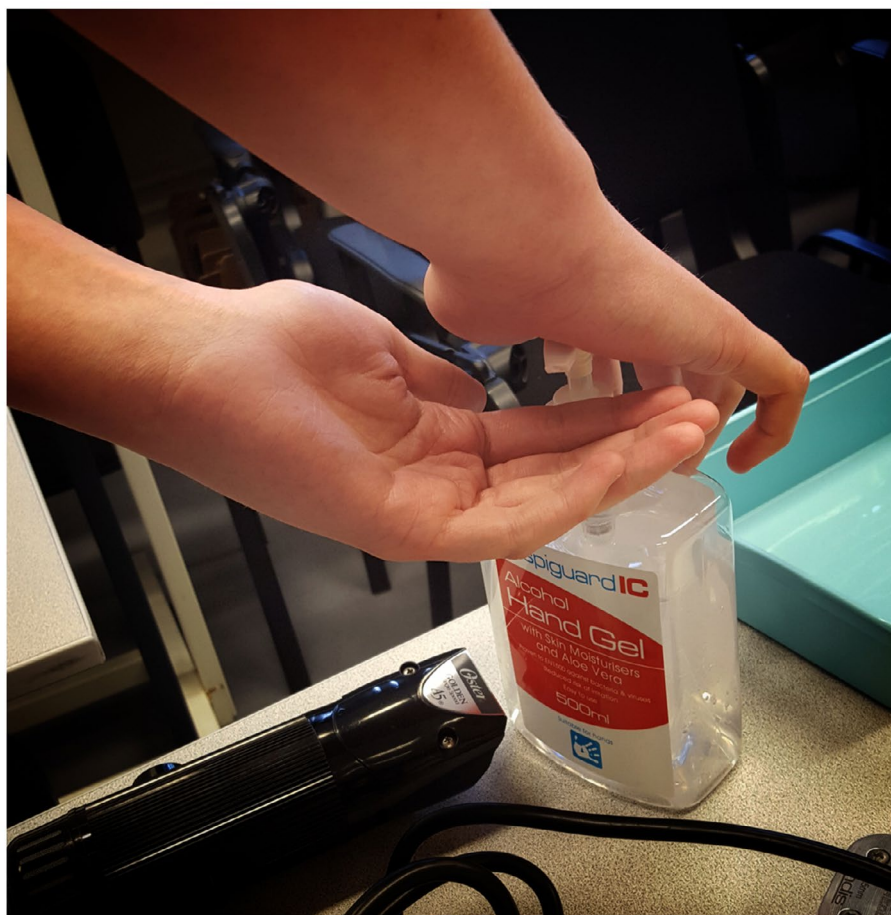


Figure 3. Practising the WHO hand hygiene technique

operates these final exams has to undergo review of the tasks being used. The have to train their examiners annually so that students can be reassured that they are being examined against the most current thinking and wherever possible the most current evidence base.

(3) Positive thinking will win the day

As stated earlier on in this piece, no student will be asked to carry out any task that will be a surprise to him/her. Believing that you can perform these tasks (as you are doing every single day in Practice) will help hugely to give you the self-belief that is required to gain a pass at this exam. The tasks are built around the Day One Competences. This means that we need to be testing a student's ability to perform certain skills on the very first day that he/she enters the Register of Veterinary Nurses. If you are prepared, then there will be no surprises.

The exam process does not expect perfection, it is asking for competency and safe practice. You are all working at this level, when your college or university has entered you for your final OSCEs.

(4) There is no ulterior motive

Please be reassured that the examiners have no ulterior motive when marking you. And (shock, horror!) OSCE examiners actually WANT you to pass the exams. You are examined by either RVNs or MRCVSs and we all had to sit this style of examination so we all remember exactly how we felt on the day that we sat them. We want to make you feel as relaxed and as positive as we can. If you perform the task as you do in practice, then you will be awarded the marks. If you are unsure of a piece of equipment then ask for help, if you need clarification on something then ask for that clarification. Don't mistake the

examiner's quietness for anything other than respect for the job in hand. We can't chatter away to you – we could put you off and we don't want to do that. We are quiet so as not to miss any of the work that you are doing and we are willing you on to perform to the best of your abilities. Try and view your examiner as your greatest ally, not as the enemy who is willing you to make mistakes and trip up so we can have a power trip and mark you as a fail. I have worked with many examiners over the years, and I can categorically say that we all want you to pass!

(5) Clinical Coaches – you have a huge part to play too

Now coaches, you are your students' greatest cheerleader during this process, and while I appreciate that the pom-poms would get in the way during the working day, never underestimate the influence you can have on how your students view this exam. If you fill their heads with the myths and old wives' tales that surround the exam, they will view them with fear and dread. Your role is to be calm and supportive. You have taught them all of the tasks that they could be examined on and so many more. A student who goes into his/her OSCEs calm and well-practised is an absolute reflection on how they have been prepared by their mentor and coach.

And finally ...

(6) Perfect Practise Prevents Poor Performance

Sorry, but I have to state the obvious. The more a student practises, the more confidence will be felt on the day. Of course nerves will play a part, but we need adrenalin to sharpen our performance. I will never tell students that they won't feel nervous. That would be foolish, but I do tell them that the butterflies they feel are our bodies' way of telling us that we are ready for anything, that we are prepared to show what we can do and that we are ready to pass!

Good luck to all of you who are preparing to sit your OSCEs and thank you to all who support you.