An introduction to practical examinations

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ABSTRACT: From almost the outset of training, student VNs are concerned about the practical examinations or OSCEs. A mixture of horror stories and previous experiences from other colleagues taint the mind and stir up the imagination, such that for some students these examinations become a hurdle they feel they will never overcome. Hopefully, learning more about the structure of these examinations may alleviate some of this fear. For this article we have chosen not to focus on the particulars of the set-up/stations, as each awarding body or higher institution will have its own way of conducting the examinations. Students are advised to ask about their own examinations at their particular college or university.

What are the practical examinations?

An Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) is designed to test clinical performance and competence in skills that are deemed essential for a day-one competent Veterinary Nurse. You will already have demonstrated a level of competence in your training by completing your online log – your Central Skills Log or Nursing Progress Log. The written examinations and OSCEs are then used to confirm your knowledge and skill prior to awarding you the qualification.

An OSCE usually comprises a circuit of short (usually six-minute) stations, in which each candidate is examined on a one-to-one basis with one examiner and a simulated patient. Each station may have a different examiner, or you may have the same examiner for more than one of your stations. At some stations there may be an assistant present who is there to help you with your patient, if required. The assistant is not marking you.

Candidates rotate through the stations, completing all of them on their circuit. In this way, all candidates tackle the same stations. It is considered to be an improvement over traditional examination methods because the stations can be standardised, enabling fairer peer comparison, and procedures can be assessed without endangering a patient's health (**Table 1**).

As the name suggests, an OSCE is designed to be:

- **Objective** – all candidates are assessed using exactly the same stations with the same marking scheme. In an OSCE, candidates are allocated a mark for each step on the mark scheme that they perform correctly, which therefore makes the assessment of clinical skills more objective, rather than subjective.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of OSCEs

Advantages of OSCEs over other examinations	Disadvantages of OSCEs over other examinations
uniform scenarios for all candidates	list learning
availability	idealised 'textbook' methodologies may not mimic real-life situations
safety, no danger of injury to patients	expensive
no risk of litigation	
feedback from impartial examiners	

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- **Structured** – stations in OSCEs are designed to test specific outcomes. The same information is provided to all candidates. Instructions are carefully written to ensure that the candidate is given a very specific task to complete. The OSCE is carefully structured to include parts from all elements of the curriculum, as well as a wide range of skills.
- **Clinical examination** – the OSCE is designed to apply clinical knowledge.

How are they marked?

Marking in OSCEs is done by the examiner using a standardised mark sheet. These mark sheets may be available online or from your college. The examiner will watch you as you perform the task and mark 'achieved' or 'not achieved' against each step. The examiner does not have any hidden or other mark sheets with which to assess your performance.

Occasionally, there may be a second person marking within a station. This is either an internal or an external quality assurer; their job is to observe the examiner not you, to ensure each examiner is marking each candidate fairly and consistently. You should not be concerned about this additional person as they are there to ensure your examination is run to the best standard achievable.

The examiners

All examiners are either Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) or Veterinary Surgeons (MsRCVS). All examiners will be on the RCVS *Register* and have declared that they each have kept up with their CPD to ensure they are up to date with clinical skills and knowledge.

On top of this, most awarding bodies require their examiners to undergo training to ensure that each has the required skill to follow the structured mark sheet, remain impartial and to act professionally during the examinations.

Each examiner will also have attended regular standardisation sessions with the awarding body. These sessions are to ensure that all examiners interpret and examine a task in the same way, to ensure that each candidate is given a fair assessment.

Above all, remember that the examiners are human and not monsters whose task is to fail you!

Preparing for the examination

- Ensure that you know where your exam is being held. If necessary/ available, do a 'dummy' run prior to the day of your exam.
- Make sure that you leave plenty of time to travel to your examination and that you have a contact number in case of any emergencies or hold-ups that are beyond your control.
- Ensure that you have all the required documents and consumables – including identification, letters, gloves etc. before you set off for your examination. Your college/university will have told you what equipment you require.
- Ensure that your uniform is clean and tidy. Although there are no points for this in the examination, it will help to put you in a professional frame of mind and give you a sense of pride in yourself.
- Tie up any long hair.
- Ensure your fingernails are short and polish free. No false nails!
- Nothing below the elbow. This includes watches. If a station needs a timer this will usually be provided. Feel free to use your own fob watch or scissors.
- If you're unsure of what is being asked of you, ask your examiner for clarification. You won't lose marks for this; but will do if you go on to perform the incorrect skill because you have misunderstood what is being asked of you.
- If you remember something that you should have done earlier, go back and do it. Again, depending on the requirement of the task you will not lose marks for performing it in the wrong order, but will do if you forget an important part completely.
- If the examiner has left out equipment for you, then use it – if a station has gloves and an apron laid out, then put them on. They aren't there to trick you.

How to cope with those nerves

The subject of dealing with examination stress and anxiety is a very broad subject. To cover all aspects of the management of anxiety and stress is outside of the scope of this article. However, here are some tips and information we hope will be useful.

We have all had to take examinations throughout our lives – from primary school through secondary school, college or university. We have all had to meet targets at certain ages as a measure of progression and level of achievement. The majority of students do not like examinations and feel anxious about the exam itself and what the outcome will be.

Sometimes, the outcome is not what we expect and, indeed, what we hope for. Sitting examinations throughout life develops a pattern of learnt experience which can either be positive or negative.

The VN OSCE examination is one that carries negative connotations for many people even before they get to the examination. Much of the apprehension created about the practical examinations arises because of concerns that the candidate will run out of time when performing a task; as well as the normal anxiety that arises when individuals are under observation, especially when performing a task that is unfamiliar.

As previously mentioned, the examiner is there to ensure that the candidate performs to a level that is commensurate with safe clinical practice and this assessment must be undertaken to ensure that those who achieve the RVN qualification have attained an appropriate and standardised level of nursing practice.

Whilst anxiety is something that we all experience in life, it is unpleasant and can prevent us from facing our fears; indeed, at its worst, it can make us think that we are going mad! But it is essential to understand that it is a normal reaction and is part of our survival instincts.

Situations that can feel scary to one individual may not concern another. Those affected can feel embarrassed and worry that they are abnormal, resulting in heightened emotions and sensations that are very real to the individual concerned **(Table 2)**.

A lot of people will hide their distress, not wanting to make a fuss. Commonly, only a small fraction of their anxiety is visible – they may, instead, become dispirited and may appear apathetic and unconcerned to others. Anxiety can be extremely destructive, especially

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Table 2. Some symptoms of anxiety

Some symptoms of anxiety
feeling sick
light-headedness
sense of feeling of impending doom
avoidance of situations
pounding heart rate
impaired respiration (hyperventilating)
constipation/diarrhoea
headaches
digestive disorders

before such an important event as an examination.

It is essential that, in order to progress and find techniques to manage it, the individual must recognise and accept that anxiety is being experienced. Until the individual is willing to discuss the issues/anxiety, its true depth and the feelings are likely to be masked.

Colleagues, employer, friends and family who can support, encourage and assist the individual in working towards the goal of being successful in the OSCE examination, form the most important support structure. Sometimes, to be challenged by colleagues or friends can be of benefit and help.

For example, performing the OSCE tasks in front of a peer on a regular basis helps by familiarising the candidate with the feeling of being observed just as it will occur in the actual examination.

An individual who is experiencing anxiety can adopt a number of ways of dealing with the situation:

- change the situation
- change oneself to adapt to the situation
- withdraw from it
- develop ways of living with it.

The most obvious choice in this case is to change oneself to adapt to the situation in order to achieve the qualification. This, however, takes a lot of effort and the idea of change and setting goals can be very difficult and daunting. It is vital to set goals that are realistic and achievable, but to take into account the individual's personal needs and habits.

Identification and implementation of change cannot be "One of these days I will..." It needs to be replaced with "Tomorrow or Tuesday I will..." Putting off change is avoidance and will not help tackle anxiety or help with preparation for the examinations.

One of the key ways to deal with anxiety is consistent, daily practice – performing the individual tasks to OSCE standards, and not just in the final couple of weeks before the examination. It is the individual's responsibility to do this.

If a task is not performed according to best practice routinely, when anxiety develops – as in the examinations – we commonly go back to everyday practice, which can result in missing steps on the marking criteria. Ensuring that we work to best practice at all times will promote a degree of confidence which will help to ensure that fewer mistakes are likely to be made.

Simple breathing techniques can help ward off impending panic. Inhaling through the nose over a count of four and exhaling through the mouth over a count of four, can help slow the respiratory and heart rate down. This can be practised during the task and whilst waiting for the next OSCE station.

It is also worthwhile to avoid looking at other students outside the OSCE station, as they are likely to be anxious as well. This is also important when arriving at the examination centre, prior to the start of the examination. Students will commonly talk about how anxious they are and this has a tendency to exacerbate the level of anxiety in the group as a whole.

Identify strategies to avoid this scenario – perhaps take a book (a novel rather than a text book) to read which is a simple distracter and allows thoughts to be focused on the narrative and not on the examination. This will need to be discussed with your centre and approved by the senior examiner prior to the examinations.

If a mistake has been made and identified after the task has ended, it is vital that the mistake is put to the back of the mind and not dwelt upon; because it cannot be rectified and this distraction may lead to further mistakes being made in the next task.

Frequently Asked Questions

What if the time allowed is too short – can I get extra time?

You should have ample time to complete the task(s) at each station, as they have been designed to fit the allotted time. Some stations contain tasks that take up most of the time available, whilst others may be completed with ample time to spare. The length of time that is taken by a candidate is, therefore, not an indication of how well – or poorly – the individual has addressed the requirements of the task. All candidates face the same challenge and most finish well within the time limit.

If you have any special circumstances that prevent you from being able physically to complete the stations in the allotted time, you should speak to your college or university about any reasonable adjustments that can be made for you. These will be dealt with on an individual case-by-case basis.

Should I worry if I finish a station early?

Finishing early does not necessarily indicate a problem. Many stations can be completed in less than the time allotted. The examiner may just want to confirm that you are happy that you have finished prior to leaving the station.

Is there any hidden equipment?

No. All equipment needed to complete the tasks will be provided. If you really do feel there is something missing, inform the examiner of the element that you think is missing and ask for clarification.

What if something goes wrong in the exam that was not my fault?

If you genuinely feel something happened that was beyond your control or impaired your ability to perform well – light failure or excessive noise, for example – you should speak to the senior examiner at the time, who will advise you of the appeal process and will make a note of your concern. Do not wait for the results to come out to question the examination process. VNJ

Useful Reading

HARDEN, R. M. & GLEESON, F. A. (1979) Assessment of clinical competence using an objective structured clinical examination (OSCE). *Medical Education*, January. 13(1).

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