

## **HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE USMLE**

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### Overview:

*The United States Medical Licensure Examination (USMLE) is a three-step exam process; if one is fortunate to pass all steps, this makes him or her eligible to practice medicine in the United States. Step 1 evaluates the examinee's knowledge of basic science, step 2 CK (clinical knowledge) a grasp of diagnostics and therapeutics, step 2 CS (clinical skills) assesses bedside manner, interview skills and diagnostic acumen, and step 3 puts everything all together in the form of clinical questions emphasizing on management of the patient and 9 patient cases. Steps 1 and 2 CK may be taken in the Philippines as they are computer-based, but steps 2 CS and 3 are only administered in the United States (note: step 3 is also computer based). This section describes how to prepare for this set of tests and the importance of obtaining as high a score as possible.*

The decision to pursue residency and subspecialty training in the US should be made early during internship. (\**L. Felix*: or better yet, during your 2<sup>nd</sup> year or 3<sup>rd</sup> year of medical school in order to take the right electives in the US). The commitment needed to prepare for the US Medical Licensure Examination (USMLE) is not trivial. The questions are cleverly crafted and the coverage is quite extensive. There are no quick solutions or magic formula for acing, or even just passing the tests. None of the three examination steps (1, 2 and 3, which we will refer to as "Steps") can be compared to the Philippine Medical Licensing Examination because the content, format and level of difficulty vary tremendously. Bear in mind that these exercises are as much a test of will and determination as they are of basic knowledge and clinical aptitude.

Information for each USMLE Step is available on the internet at [www.usmle.org](http://www.usmle.org) and [www.ecfm.org](http://www.ecfm.org). Before taking each exam, applicants must read and be familiar with the most current bulletin on each test. The goal of this section is not to repeat information presented in these bulletins but to advise applicants regarding the best way to prepare for each test.

Scoring high on both Step 1 and 2CK should be the ultimate priority for every foreign medical graduate (FMG). Matching in a competitive US residency program is a very steep climb and FMG's start off with a clear disadvantage because American Medical Graduates (AMG) will always be prioritized. This may seem unfair but it is something that FMGs have to accept and deal with. If the situation were reversed and American graduates were fighting to get into the Philippine General Hospital, UP graduates would be first to demand that they be given priority. In any case, scoring high in the USMLE will make your application stand out and will increase your chances of getting interviewed, as it is an objective standard that the program directors can judge your abilities with respect to the AMGs.

The score that you set as your goal directly correlates with the type of residency program that you will most probably enter. It is important to realize at an early point that there are three categories of residency programs that an applicant can apply for, and this is true for all

specialties. University programs are based in hospitals that serve as the primary teaching institutions for medical schools. Think “Ivy League” hospitals. (note: not all University programs are “Ivy League”, but certainly the more well-known ones are). Their counterparts in the Philippines would be programs based in PGH (for UP) and UST. These programs are most difficult to enter because most AMGs prefer university programs, for obvious reasons. Think of it this way, if you are a UP graduate, will you pick Pasay City General Hospital over PGH?

The second category includes programs based in community hospitals run by or strongly affiliated with a university hospital. This also includes programs in tertiary hospitals that have established their own medical schools. In the Philippines, this would be the equivalent of St. Luke’s and Medical City. To a certain extent, getting into these programs is also difficult. Some AMGs who performed poorly in their medical school may apply to these programs for their back-up. Still, other programs in this category may even be better than many university programs. For instance, the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio is ranked 3rd in the US and has recently established their own medical school. Top American graduates usually include this hospital on their priority list.

The third category consists of programs that are based in community hospitals that may or may not have some affiliation with a university program. In the Philippines, this could be St. Martin de Porres in San Juan or Paranaque Medical Hospital. These programs are most FMG-friendly because they know for certain that they will not be able to fill their positions with American graduates. Consequently, these are the programs that will most likely offer an out-of-match position or what is more commonly known as a "Pre-Match".

Going back to the USMLE, FMGs should personally evaluate themselves before taking any of the Steps. If you are ranked within the Top 30 of your class and can easily muster a score of 95 or higher in Steps 1 and 2, getting into a university program may be a real possibility. If you did OK in med school and can get a score ranging from 85-95, some less competitive university programs and some high-end programs in the second category could very well be within reach. If for some reason, you can only aim for a score in the range of 75-85, your best option will be to go for programs in the third category. **The reason we are discussing this now is to highlight the fact that the score you get for Step 1 and 2CK will make or break you.**

[\**L. Felix*: FMGs should never underestimate the value of their scores as this will be one of the most important factors in determining the number of interviews, the places where they will get their interviews, as well as the rank of the candidate during ranking time after all the interviews have been completed. FMGs should never compromise speed in taking all the exams in a short period in exchange for lower scores. These scores will be with you throughout your application and even when you apply for fellowships in the future. You have one shot to get it right (unless you failed a test wherein you get another chance, plus the failed mark on your record) so get it done the best way that you can.]

Most programs will use USMLE scores as a screening tool to identify whom to interview. As a UP graduate, it is not unreasonable to aim for >85. Before taking Step 1 and 2, know your strengths and weaknesses, and set an honest and reasonable goal for yourself. Bear in mind that our biggest competition for the residency match, the Indian, Pakistani and Chinese graduates,

are larger in number and most of them have mastered the art of test-taking. Many will come with amazing scores of 99 in Steps 1 and 2, and possibly 3 also. Filipinos may have an advantage because we can communicate more effectively in English, but this will only become evident during step 2 CS and the interview. **AT THIS POINT, THE PRIORITY IS TO SCORE HIGH IN STEPS 1 and 2 CK, AND GET YOURSELVES INVITATIONS TO INTERVIEW.**

### **USMLE STEP 1:**

This exam will test your ability to apply basic medical science concepts in the practice of medicine. While a photographic mind may give some advantage, acing the test will require more analytical thinking. For instance, instead of asking what portion of the gut normally transports bile acids from the lumen back to the liver, Step 1 will ask why a patient with severe Crohn's disease who undergoes ileal resection will develop steatorrhea. Both questions are testing your knowledge of bile acid metabolism but the latter goes further by testing how well you can apply concepts.

The following books are tried and tested. But depending on your study habits and learning styles, other books may be useful. The important thing to remember is once you've committed to a book, you shouldn't falter and panic in the middle of your review and get a new one.

- Biochemistry: Lippincott's (Champe and Harvey)
- Pharmacology: Lippincott's (Mycek, Champe et. al.)
- Physiology: Board Review Series (Costanzo)
- Pathology: Board Review Series (Schneider)
- Microbiology: Clinical Microbiology Made Ridiculously Simple (Gladwin)
- Anatomy and NeuroAnatomy: High Yield (Fix, Dudek)
- Behavioral Science and Epidemiology: Kaplan Review Book
- Integrated Summary Review: First Aid for Step1

Do not make the mistake of not reviewing medical ethics in the US setting. This will be tested a lot in Steps 1, 2 CK and 3.

[\**L. Felix*:

- Kaplan Step 1 Lecture Notes
- USMLE World Online MCQs and Self-Assessment
- The very latest edition of First Aid for Step 1
- Kaplan USMLE Medical Ethics: The 100 Cases You are Most Likely to See on the Exam by Conrad Fischer

The Kaplan Step 1 Lecture Notes is a very comprehensive stack of information meant to touch on all the important topics covered in the exam. It gives you everything you need to know and it is comprehensive enough that you don't have to refer to the usual textbooks for each individual subject. The scope of the material is too wide though to be used to emphasize on very high yield subjects which makes it prudent to have something like the:

- Latest edition of First Aid for Step 1 (don't use old editions please as the information is

updated yearly to reflect on the latest trends on what the exams for that year emphasized as well as updates on the latest medical information) is very useful for providing you with what most probably will be asked on the exam. It is approximately 500 pages of high-yield information worth memorizing cover to cover (and I do mean memorize every word). This book is every Step 1-takers best friend, as you will find that everything on your test can be found in this book in one way or another. Use this book especially right before the exam in order to memorize all the stuff worth memorizing. A word of warning though, this book is not meant to be used on its own, as even it's own authors attest. Make sure your basic knowledge is solid with the use of the Kaplan Lecture notes.

- Another essential review material is the USMLE World Step 1 MCQs. Use it as a learning tool more than as an assessment tool. Emphasize more on reading all the information included in this qbank and don't worry if your average in the exams is not that high. Another good thing about the USMLE World qbank is that it gives you a very good idea of what the actual exam will be like. This is important as first-time USMLE takers will definitely have a harder time if they are not familiar with the exam interface as well as the time allotted for each exam block. Make sure to practice using the timed mode as this will prepare you a lot for the pressure of having to read and answer 1 question in approximately 1.2 minutes.
- A good optional supplement is the Medical Ethics book by Conrad Fischer. The practice of medicine in the US especially with regards to ethics is a lot different than what you saw during medical school and internship. This book is a good read in order to reemphasize the topics covered in the Kaplan Notes. I would say that this book is not required reading but will help a lot in maximizing your score since there are a lot of questions covering ethics in all the USMLEs.]

### **USMLE STEP 2 CK:**

Though a lot of applicants will think of Step 2CK as easier than Step 1, this may only be because most test takers are fresh off the clinics when they take CK. Persons who consider themselves more "analytical", rather than being "memorizers" may also find this step easier. This exam emphasizes knowing how to recognize, diagnose and manage common medical conditions. Logical and evidence-based thinking is the name of the game. This is why it is crucial for FMGs to have a book on every subspecialty when reviewing for CK. The way you may have learned to manage simple cases may not be the standard for US hospitals. This is especially true for picking the right antibiotic, for example. Another important thing for Step 2 CK is to spend some time practicing with sample questions. This exam will introduce you to long and elaborate case-based questions. You have to learn how to be comfortable with fast reading and quick processing of "buzz words," clues that will lead you to the right answer. On the average, you will have 1.2 minutes per question. This will not be enough, if you will insist on reading each case and question word per word.

If you can get your hands on and study with Kaplan Notes for Step 2 and Crush Step 2, then you should be fine. Good practice materials that can be found online include Kaplan Qbank and USMLE World.

[\**L. Felix*: For the USMLE Step 2 CK, I found that the most important reference material is the USMLE World qbank. As stated above, use this qbank more of as a learning tool than as an assessment tool. Master all the concepts as all the topics covered in the qbank are high-yield and up-to-date. One of the most important things to know about Step 2 CK is that good time-management is essential. How you manage your time can make or break you in this exam. You will not have time to read every word in the stem and the time remaining after you have finished reading is barely enough to make a quick analysis so it is essential to train your mind to think fast for this exam. The Kaplan Notes for Step 2 CK are also comprehensive and updated enough that it is no longer necessary to consult other textbooks for the exam. Use these to read up on all the information you need to know for Step 2 CK.]

### **USMLE STEP 2 CS:**

There is really no need to fret about Step 2 CS. Grab any review book (First Aid for Step 2 CS and Mastering the OSCE/CSA , for example), study the common cases over a month, and practice your English and bedside manners with a friend and you should be fine. While there are known cases of UP students flunking in Step 2 CS, these are more the exceptions than the rule. Filipinos speak good English and we are the third happiest people in the world. There is no reason why you can't, for a few hours speak flawlessly, exude professionalism and be charming and pleasant.

Good Luck!

[\**L. Felix*: First Aid for Step 2 CS is the only reference you need in order to pass this test. As long as you have a study partner/patient (ideally a test-taker too so you can switch roles while studying) and you are able to go through all the cases in the book and simulate everything down to the time limit, you should be able to pass the test. One important thing to remember is that the main point of this exam is not actually to diagnose the illness of the patient (although it still has some points in this exam) but to prove to the standardized patient (who will be the one giving the bulk of your score) that you can talk to, interview, and examine American patients in an understandable, respectful, and friendly manner.]