



The European Certificate in Nephrology: what is involved and how to prepare

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The European Certificate in Nephrology (ECN) was introduced in 2017 as a trial collaboration between the European Union of Medical Specialists, the Federation of the Royal Colleges and the Renal Association (UK). It is a written examination that shares the same format, and most of the content, of the Speciality Certificate in Nephrology (SCE). Since 2009, passing the SCE has been required in order for UK renal trainees to achieve certification as a renal specialist and, from the outset, the examination has been offered internationally as a test of knowledge for nephrologists. At present, only Switzerland requires the ECN for completion of training, although other countries may follow and in time the ECN and SCE may become a single exam. The examination is aimed at renal trainees towards the end of their training and covers the breadth of knowledge it is thought a newly appointed renal consultant (or specialist) ought to have. It does not aim to test detailed subspecialist knowledge (e.g. acute renal transplantation or vasculitis), but it does require practical knowledge, problem-solving ability and clinical judgement of the sort that a general nephrologist should have. The curriculum was written by the Joint Royal Colleges Training Board and is oriented towards practising clinicians, who should be clinically experienced when they sit for the exam. The curriculum is available at <https://www.jrcptb.org.uk/documents/2010-renal-medicine-amendment-2012>.

FORMAT

The format is based on that used in the Membership of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the UK examinations, with two papers of 3 h, each including 100 extended matching multiple-choice questions. In this format, the candidate is presented with a clinical stem, followed by relevant data and is asked a question that requires him/her to choose the best from five possible choices. The choices are presented so that one answer is the best, with four 'distractors' being possible but not correct. There is no doubt that there is considerable time pressure in the exam, but there is no negative marking and well-prepared candidates should never be guessing! Questions are in English, using SI units, with a correction table made available. Where possible,

questions test knowledge of clinical trials, but inevitably many are based on opinion and test judgement. Knowledge of relevant guidelines (e.g. Kidney Disease: Improving Global Outcomes, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) is advisable. It is inevitable that the wide curriculum means that areas that may not be strictly within the remit of nephrologists in particular countries (e.g. nephro-urology, pathology, radiology) may appear in the exam.

QUESTION WRITING

Questions are written by trained nephrologists (UK and European) and reviewed initially by a small group of peers in a question-writing group. Question topics are randomly allocated to writers and not specifically within their own subspeciality interest to ensure that they are suitable for a generalist candidate. Questions are entered into a question bank from which they can be chosen according to the blueprint to constitute the exam. The papers are then reviewed again in the exam board, which has representatives from the stakeholders, where they can be further edited, and are reviewed again in the standard-setting group. The involvement of up to 20 nephrologists in reviewing the questions is felt to be the best guarantee that they reflect general opinion. The blueprint, which determines the distribution of questions, is available at <https://www.mrcpuk.org/sites/default/files/documents/SCE%20Nephrology%20Blueprint%202014%20Final%20.pdf>. The content of the SCE and ECN is almost identical, with only very few questions reflecting UK practice so specifically that they are unsuitable for a European candidate.

PASS MARK AND STANDARD SETTING

The pass mark is derived by the modified Angoff method in which each standard setter estimates what proportion of 'just passing candidates' will answer a question correctly. A *post hoc* correction of the pass mark is applied using the Hofstee compromise, which allows a final pass mark to be calculated. This correction is normalized to the reference cohort (UK trainees for the SCE or European trainees for the ECN). For more details

about how the pass mark is derived, see <https://www.mrcpuk.org/mrcpuk-examinations/results/exam-pass-marks>.

PREPARATION

The 'Updated programme for harmonization of training in nephrology in the European Union' (http://era-edta.org/CKJ_Published_paper.pdf) gives information about the expected range of knowledge. Candidates may also wish to refer to the resources recommended for the UK SCE in nephrology (<https://www.mrcpuk.org/mrcpuk-examinations/specialty-certificate-examinations/specialties/nephrology>), which gives indications of available resources and sample questions, much of which is applicable to the ECN. There are no officially approved courses to prepare for the SCE or ECN, but the Renal Association presents the 'Advanced Nephrology Course' in Oxford every January. Although this does not aim specifically to prepare candidates for the SCE or ECN, the curriculum covered does take into account the requirements of the exam and both UK and European candidates find it useful. Candidates

should read widely and attend courses offered by national or international bodies, but most importantly, they should be clinically experienced. We would recommend at least 18 months of renal specialist training, including experience with different dialysis modalities and some transplant follow-up, before attempting the ECN.

REGISTRATION

Registration for the exam is currently at the end of each year (a 5- to 7-week period between late October/early November and early December). The exam takes place once per year, either the last day of February or the first day of March.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared.

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