

Letters to the Editor

Should there be a standardised formal examination process in diving and hyperbaric medicine as part of the SPUMS Diploma?

Dear Editor,

For the last year, I have been working as a hyperbaric fellow and as a senior registrar in chronic pain. My knowledge in chronic pain has been growing exponentially during this time, whereas my progress in hyperbaric medicine appears to be less impressive. Formal and informal teaching was excellent in both disciplines. Furthermore, I would consider my respective peers equally inspiring. Why should there be such a difference? One major difference has been the compulsory examination process I had to undergo for the Fellowship of the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists.

This two-day examination consists of ten short-answer questions, followed by three formal vivas on the afternoon of Day 1, as well as more formal vivas, short clinical cases and a long case on Day 2. Apart from a new set of mental scars and some features of post-traumatic stress disorder, the examination did leave me with an extensive working knowledge of chronic and acute pain, for which I can only be grateful.

My experience in hyperbaric medicine on the other hand has been extremely informative, pleasant and relaxed. I have been able to instigate and participate in a tremendous amount of research and have, as such, grown in a vastly different way. The expansion of my knowledge was based mainly upon my own motivation and the guidance of my department. No significant external force was motivating me to read, and it is indeed unfortunate that most human beings do require a degree of external pressure (e.g., a looming examination) to motivate them to their full potential.

Based upon my experience in a different subspecialty I would like to make a case for a standardised written and oral examination in hyperbaric medicine, aimed at the level of basic trainees (i.e., the SPUMS Diploma). Advantages of such an examination process would include firstly a significant consolidation of the knowledge that basic trainees can gain in diving and hyperbaric medicine. Secondly, particular emphasis could be placed upon the critical analysis of the levels of evidence available for the various indications that have been suggested for hyperbaric oxygen therapy. This focus is likely to reveal areas in which little or no level one and two evidence is available and might trigger new research efforts by trainees and senior staff throughout Australasia. Lastly, the necessary development of a core

curriculum for the SPUMS Diploma (similar to the proposed curriculum for the Certificate) could lead to a further increase in recognition of hyperbaric medicine within the medical community.

Time, effort, manpower and money required to set up such an examination process would be considerable. Nevertheless, I suggest that the gain far outweighs the pain in the long run.

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Reply from the Education Officer on behalf of the Academic Board

I thank Dr Neff for his thoughts on the SPUMS Diploma. I have no doubt that studying for a formal exit examination would help some trainees in diving and hyperbaric medicine consolidate a broader knowledge of the field. I am less convinced that an examination is an efficient way to identify or stimulate new areas of research. The distinction between these goals of training and research is important.

The SPUMS Diploma has become the *de facto* basic training in diving and hyperbaric medicine in Australia. However, it is noteworthy that training is not a stated purpose of SPUMS. On the other hand, "to promote and facilitate the study of all aspects of underwater and hyperbaric medicine" is one of the stated purposes of SPUMS, and one of our rules allows for award of a Diploma (South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society Inc. Statement of Rules and Purposes, 3rd revision, 1999).

I believe that the current format of the SPUMS Diploma, which has a strong research emphasis, is most in keeping with this stated purpose. Perhaps the current SPUMS Diploma candidates will meet this with mixed emotions, but it is not the intention of this Academic Board to introduce such an examination as part of the SPUMS Diploma of Diving & Hyperbaric Medicine.

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