Feedback on the MRCGP Applied Knowledge Test (AKT)

AKT 36 – May 2019

After each sitting of the exam, the AKT core group provides feedback on overall candidate performance via the College website and direct to educators via Deaneries/LETBs. We also highlight areas of general interest related to the exam. We hope that this feedback is helpful to all those involved in education and training, particularly AiTs themselves, and we welcome comments on the feedback to the email address at the end of this report.

For important general information about how to prepare for the AKT exam, including a description of the exam format and content as well as ‘frequently asked questions’ please see the weblinks throughout the AKT page of the MRCGP site.

Two common “FAQs” relate to how the AKT approaches differences across the UK and also differences between sets of national guidance on the same topic. We test understanding in areas where there is consistency across the UK, eg death certification, but not on the procedural differences. We are well aware that contrasting guidelines currently exist in a number of clinical areas and we will make accommodation for this, generally by testing on recommendations that the guidelines make in common.

The AKT 36 exam was held on 1st May 2019 and taken by 1502 candidates.

Statistics

Scores in AKT 36 ranged from 63 to 194 out of 200 questions with a mean overall score of 144.5 marks (72.23%).

The mean scores by subject area were:
- ‘Clinical medicine’ 72% (160 questions)
- ‘Evidence interpretation’ 74.5% (20 questions)
- ‘Organisational’ 72% (20 questions)

The pass mark for AKT 36 was set at 135 with pass rates as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates (numbers)</th>
<th>Pass rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All candidates (1502)</td>
<td>69.57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK first-time takers (816)</td>
<td>85.91%</td>
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Other key statistics from this test:

- Reliability (Cronbach α coefficient) = 0.93
- Standard error of measurement = 5.80 (2.90%)
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Performance in key clinical areas – AKT 36

Providing feedback which is educationally useful but which does not undermine the security of test questions is never easy. We have highlighted below general areas of good performance, as well as areas where there is room for improvement. Both Curriculum and Content Guide references are given.

Candidates are reminded that the AKT tests for appropriate and cost-effective management, so sometimes the correct answer is not to investigate, prescribe or refer. Candidates find this option a difficult one to choose, as is sometimes the case in clinical practice.

Some questions may relate to clinical situations such as management of mildly abnormal blood test results. As described above, it may be that significant additional testing is not required and this may be the correct answer option.

We may ask about investigations commonly undertaken in secondary care after patients are referred, for example, for investigation of suspected cancer. We do not expect candidates to have detailed knowledge of these investigations, but we would expect that candidates have sufficient awareness to be able to respond to patient queries about possible further tests, when a referral is discussed and agreed.

We also remind candidates that drug choices should be those that reflect evidence-based, widespread and accepted practice in primary care, and not those that a secondary care doctor with specialist skills and experience might sometimes make.

Improvements

In AKT 36 candidates performed better than previously in questions related to:

- Common drug cautions and side-effects e.g. in relation to prescribing in renal disease, and use of NSAIDs. (2.02 Patient safety and quality of care, p.33 content guide). The safe use of medicines is widely tested in AKT and it is encouraging to see this improvement.

- Awareness of guidelines, e.g. those affecting respiratory conditions; and diagnosis of cancer. (Most clinical areas of curriculum and content guide). These are important areas of clinical work where we are pleased to see good performance, and we hope candidates are reassured by the statement previously with regard to contrasting guidelines.
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Areas causing difficulty for candidates

2.03 The GP in the wider professional environment (p.53 content guide
Administration, ethical and regulatory frameworks)

There were some difficulties in this area. GPs have a wide range of responsibilities in
relation to the management of the practice, which includes staff issues. Candidates
are reminded that vaccination programmes and schedules relate to more than just
childhood immunisations.

3.04 Care of Children and Young People (p.45 content guide)

Care of children is an important and common area of GP work which we have fed
back on in the past. In AKT 36 candidates had some difficulty with management of
common childhood infections, ear problems, and the recognition of “normal variants”.
For some of these situations, prescribing or referral may not be required, or an
“active monitoring” approach is recommended.

3.06 Women’s Health (p.40 content guide)

In AKT 36 candidates showed some gaps in knowledge with regard to treatment of
pregnancy-related conditions, and appropriate use of drugs for women who are
breast feeding. We are aware that some trainees have little experience of routine
pregnancy care, and it may be that spending time with a community midwife could
help to address a learning need.

3.17 Care of People with Metabolic Problems (p.26 content guide)

Performance in questions related to diabetes tends to vary between AKT exams.
While we do not expect specialist knowledge, we do expect that candidates will be
familiar with the management of problems that commonly occur in relation to the use
of insulin, particularly where there are patient safety issues. We also expect
candidates to be familiar with oral antidiabetic drugs, including prescribing regimes,
and safe use.

3.18 Care of People with Neurological Problems (p.30 content guide)

Neurological symptoms are common in patients presenting to primary care, and
often are not indicative of serious underlying disease. Candidates are reminded to
bear in mind the prevalence of conditions when considering answer options for all
topics and not just neurology, as this will help to guide towards the correct answer.

3.19 Respiratory Health (p.36 content guide)

Whilst bearing in mind prevalence (see above), sometimes an AKT scenario may
describe clear symptoms/signs which do in fact relate to an uncommon condition,
and GPs are expected to identify these. In AKT 36 candidates had difficulty
identifying less common respiratory disease. Whilst guidelines exist to guide
diagnosis and management of many conditions, (and review of guidelines is
important for exam preparation), candidates should take a broad approach to their
clinical medicine learning needs.
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There was also some difficulty with the investigation and management undertaken in secondary care of common respiratory conditions. As stated earlier, in the general feedback section, candidates should be familiar with common secondary care tests and their general indication.

Overall feedback for past 12 months (AKT 34-36)

We have noted room for improvement in two of the past three sittings of the AKT exam in:

2.02 Patient safety and quality of care
This is a very broad heading, which is one of the reasons why this curriculum area regularly features in our feedback. Commonly, issues relate to prescribing, in particular drug dose calculations, monitoring requirements for medications and adverse reactions or contraindications of drugs.

However, this curriculum area also embraces topics such as health and safety in the workplace, which is outlined further under the “administration” section of the content guide (see national regulations/ contractual and legal frameworks).

2.03 The GP in the wider professional environment
This is also a very wide curriculum area including topics such as data interpretation and management/legal issues.

3.04 Care of children and young people
We commonly feedback on gaps in knowledge concerning common childhood infections and “normal variants”.

3.17 Care of people with metabolic problems
This is a broad area including, in particular, diabetes, as well as important but less common and perhaps overlooked endocrinological conditions.

3.19 Respiratory health
Knowledge around common conditions such as asthma and COPD is sometimes patchy, and less common conditions are sometimes not considered when answering AKT questions.

We hope that candidates will not overlook these and other important areas in their exam preparation, guided by the curriculum and the content guide.
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Misconduct

Although misconduct in professional examinations is rare, we would warn candidates that it is taken very seriously and a full investigation of any allegation will be undertaken, including reviewing CCTV footage taken in the test centres.

The MRCGP examination regulations and the code of conduct for AKT and CSA assessments give detailed information about misconduct, including the possible penalties for misconduct, in the expectation that candidates will exercise an approach consistent with standards expected by the General Medical Council. Regulations for Doctors Training for a CCT in General Practice

AKT Core Group

May 2019

Comments or questions can be sent to: exams@rcgp.org.uk