Finding your voice
You don’t need to worry about oral exams, as long as you prepare well in advance and try to keep calm. Sarah Armstrong offers some words of advice

O
cal (viva voce) examinations are possibly the most daunting of examinations to undertake and universally dreaded by students. Although they can be intimidating, they are often the best way to demonstrate a candidate’s knowledge and form a fundamental part of the finals examination procedure at many dental schools and in postgraduate qualifications.

Before an examination

Nerves are a common problem for candidates undertaking oral exams and these can affect people in different ways; disrupting normal sleeping and eating patterns, affecting your revision and causing panic during the exam itself. Thorough preparation is key, there’s no substitute for putting the work in and getting the revision done. Make sure you know what the format of the exams will be, the topics covered and what will be expected of you.

Mock examinations are an important aid in getting you used to an oral exam situation. Often students have never experienced an oral exam and getting an idea of their style/format and gaining practice answering questions is invaluable. Ask friends, colleagues or senior staff members for a mock – even if it’s just a few questions on the spot – it’s all useful practice and they can give valuable feedback.

On the examination day, try to concentrate on your own exam performance. Candidates have a habit of embellishing their performances – be them good or bad, which can be the last thing you want to hear just before you enter your own exam. Everyone will have a different exam experience – there will be different patients, examiners and questions making it almost impossible to draw comparison.

During an examination

Although tensions can be running high in an exam situation, it’s important to give yourself time to think. Make sure you’ve heard and understand the question before answering, rather than launching off on a tangent; clarify the question if you have any doubts. If you don’t know the answer to a question, tell the examiner you don’t know. Guessing is risky, especially if you say something which could be considered dangerous. Don’t worry if you can’t answer every question – the examiners are trying to explore the limits of your knowledge.

Frequently in oral examinations there is no regimented line of questioning; this is your opportunity to guide the exam using the answers you give. If you are asked to give a differential diagnosis remember, common things are common! Don’t mention rare mucosal disorders before you mention the much more common lichen planus/candidosis – the examiners WILL know more about it that you and the margin for error is much greater. They will be more interested to hear you speak confidently about a disorder you are likely to come across in every day practice rather than give an assortment of facts about the weird and wonderful!

Thinking clearly

A key factor in oral exam success is being able to think in coherent steps. Examiners want to see that candidates can think logically. Often you may be given what can seem like an overwhelming amount of information about a patient (records, models, radiographs etc). The best way to tackle this is to break up the information into steps as you would if a patient were present; presenting complaint, history of complaint, medical history, social history, past dental history, physical examination, and so on. Part of the exam may involve presenting a case to the examiners. This is an easy place to shine, so make sure you have plenty of practice in this area.

Discussing treatment options is a favourite exam topic. Don’t panic if you’re not entirely sure what the most appropriate treatment is, how you reach a decision can be more important than your final answer. Make sure you can give a collection of reasonable options and be able to discuss their pros/cons. There is often more than one right answer.

Love thy examiner

Don’t be afraid of the examiners as they are there to help you pass, not to give you a grilling. That said it’s worth finding out who may be examining you and do your research – make sure you are familiar with the examiners’ specialist subjects as these may make an appearance.

Remember, oral examinations offer a unique opportunity to demonstrate the extent of your knowledge, prepare well and you should be fine!!

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About the author

Sarah Armstrong qualified from Newcastle University in 2008 and is currently working as a vocational dental practitioner in Brampton, Cumbria.