

book reviews

Medical Masterclass, Royal College of Physicians, Editor-in-chief John D Firth. Blackwell Science 2001

12 Modules, pp2,200. 2 CD-ROMS including 60 case studies. Companion website: www.medical-masterclass.com

(Reviewed from the perspective of a senior educator)

Training in internal medicine must be rescued from the crisis precipitated by current limits on working time. How may adequate experience be gained in the early postgraduate years? The tendency to focus upon 'education' as a substitute for training would, if unchecked, produce a knowledgeable but unskilled generation of clinicians. How can the necessary skills of clinical assessment, differential diagnosis and judgement on clinical management be transferred in the new era? The Royal College of Physicians offers an innovative solution.

Medical Masterclass consists of twelve module books, interactive cases on CD ROM and an associated website. I was asked to assess the Endocrinology module. The module book contains three main sections: Clinical Presentations, Diseases and Treatments, and Investigations and Practical Procedures. The first section describes twenty clinical presentations, ranging from hirsutism to 'off legs', as problems of differential diagnosis with relevant management considerations. This approach expands upon the seminal work of this genre – *Tutorials in Differential Diagnosis* – and leads one through reasonable discussion illustrated by clinical pictures, investigations and tables of relevant information. The effect should be to develop the thought processes and associations which are normally the product of clinical experience.

Further surrogate experience is provided by the interactive cases on CD ROM. They are realistic and the information from history, examination and investigations is thoughtful and well presented. The time taken to work through a case is logged, and the cost of investigations is presented. This is real life in cyberworld. The present review is based on only two cases made available, both on infectious disease, but the format should be easily followed for any discipline.

The second section of the module book presents information in a standard textbook style. It is not clear why it was decided to re-write the textbooks, as the information is available in a variety of formats elsewhere. Perhaps it is an attempt to set out the bare minimum that all doctors intending to specialise – gastroenterologists, cardiologists, psychiatrists – should know about the other specialties. However, the section is undermined by unbalanced presentation of information and there are frequent errors of fact and offbeat opinions which could easily mislead. For example, the implication that inferior petrosal sinus blood sampling for ACTH is carried out before MR or CT scan of the pituitary is curious, especially without mention of potential complications of the procedure. The concept that medical treatment for Cushing's syndrome (eg metyrapone) is routinely given prior to pituitary or

adrenal surgery is at best contentious. In the second edition of the module books, perhaps the textbook sections could be omitted.

The section on investigations and practical procedures is well laid out. Separate discussions of stimulatory and inhibitory tests, nicely promote the central concept of dynamic testing in endocrinology: if high, try to suppress; if low try to stimulate.

The website has to be regarded as experimental. To study on the web would clock up many hours of connection time; spouses may become agitated at loss of access to the phone.

The best feature of *Medical Masterclass*, the interactive cases, could be provided on CD ROMS, reissued from year to year. If this were done, the website could be used to point to seminal papers in the current literature. Different individuals are likely to learn most efficiently by different techniques. The website is a brilliant concept under test.

The individual subscription price of £495 appears high, although if the *Masterclass* books become widely associated with success in the membership exam, wallets will open. Here we have a training simulator in development, the counterpart to the flight simulator for pilots. Now the tachograph is in the cockpit, how else will our future specialists gain sufficient experience?

ROY TAYLOR

*Department of Medicine
University of Newcastle upon Tyne*

Classy Masters of Medical Education?

(Reviewed from the perspective of an aspiring academic doctor)

The Royal College of Physicians Education department has teamed up with Blackwell Science and created *Medical Masterclass*, which according to Sir George Alberti, (President of the RCP) is the 'most innovative and important educational development from the Royal College in the last 100 years.' Sir George may have a point. *Medical Masterclass* is indeed an impressive 'sign of the times' learning package, comprising 12 paper-based modules, two CD ROMs and a companion website. The target pupils are primarily doctors early in training who intend to sit the MRCP (UK) examination (parts 1 and 2), although it seems everyone can join in the fun, with the website inviting practising physicians, general practitioners, radiologists and psychiatrists along for a refresher course.

A glance at the titles of the 12 modules initially suggests a huge (2,200 pages) medical textbook divided into smaller more (psychologically!) manageable units. However, distinguishing the publication from other textbooks is the format in which the information is delivered; each medical subject is introduced as a series of clinical presentations, for example, 'acutely painful red eye' (neurology, ophthalmology and psychiatry module) and 'don't tell my wife' (infectious diseases and dermatology). Clinical approach, relevant points in the history and examination are discussed, as are possible diagnoses and investigations. This method of presenting information seems entirely appropriate for junior doctors who are faced with this situation daily at work. Fear not for those who find this approach too nouveau as you can turn to the 'diseases and treatments' section which lists diseases in the more conventional manner, discussing aetiology, clinical presentation and so on. This is also a very useful section to turn to once you have learnt, for