Focus on Radiation Oncology

Significant Changes Afoot in Radiation Oncology Exam Development and Delivery

2018;11[1]:9-10

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Development and administration of the Initial Certification (IC) qualifying (written) and certifying (oral) exams and the soon-to-be-retired Maintenance of Certification (MOC) Part 3 Exam for radiation oncology (RO) would not be possible without a cohort of dedicated and motivated volunteers working alongside ABR staff. Item inventory needs for creation of ABR MOC Online Longitudinal Assessment (OLA), to be rolled out for RO in 2020, place additional demands on volunteer time and effort. As part of a constant search for efficiencies that improve the exam development and administration processes and reduce the burden on our volunteers, the RO trustees have approved the first major change in clinical category logistics since 2012.

Before 2012, RO clinical volunteers served in one of eight categories, essentially on an ad hoc basis. Trustees, staff, and committee chairs developed exam blueprints, and then a large group of volunteers submitted items for consideration. Item-writing training was limited, so many submitted items were eventually found to be unusable. Oral examiners were invited to submit clinical cases and to serve at the exam on a similar ad hoc basis.

In 2012, category teams were formalized, with each category having two co-chairs—one for written exams and one for oral exams. Category members were appointed for specific terms, with general responsibilities of written item and clinical case submission. Webinars were initiated for training in item writing, and all oral examiners were selected from standing category members. The quality and utility of submitted written items and clinical cases progressively improved, and the uniformity of oral exam delivery and evaluation was strengthened.

Regular feedback from RO volunteers indicated general satisfaction with the revised system, but a sense that expectations across exam development and delivery functions were somewhat burdensome. To address these concerns, the RO trustees, working with category chairs and staff, will immediately launch significant changes. Going forward, the categories and co-chair structures will remain unchanged, but rather than assuming general tasks, each volunteer will
be assigned to one of three permanent committees, with responsibility only for the tasks assigned to that committee. The committees include: 1) IC item submission, 2) OLA item submission, and 3) Oral Exam case submission. The oral examiner pool will consist of all committee members. Term of service will remain at three years, with an option for a second three-year term. The membership target for each category will be 24, with eight volunteers assigned to each committee.

A second significant change in the RO exam process will be relocation of the oral exam venue. Beginning in 2019, after 38 continuous years in Louisville, Kentucky, the exams will be administered in Tucson, Arizona, in hotels immediately adjacent to ABR headquarters. Availability of all ABR staff, a more centralized location, and improved hotel relationships should provide an excellent exam milieu for volunteers and candidates.