Focus on Residents

Changes to Diagnostic Radiology Core Exam Scoring
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The ABR Board of Trustees is constantly striving to improve the quality of all exams we administer. To that end, the trustees recently voted to change the diagnostic radiology Core Exam to a pass/fail grading model, except for the physics category, which can still be conditioned.

At its inception, scoring for the Core Exam was set up to recapitulate prior requirements for becoming board certified. A candidate therefore needed to pass a minimum threshold across 18 categories that included clinical disciplines, radiologic modalities, and physics. A grid was established to ensure that clinical and modality content was evenly distributed across all disciplines. In the old scoring model, a candidate could theoretically condition up to five different categories (clinical disciplines and/or modalities) and would not have needed to repeat the entire exam.

Since its first administration in 2013, the outcomes of the Core Exam have been remarkably consistent. More than 5,000 candidates have taken the exam, and the only category that has been conditioned is physics. Not a single candidate has failed to meet the minimum threshold for passing in another category. When a candidate fails the Core Exam, they do so because they perform poorly on the entire exam rather than in a few domains.

The consistency of these results allowed the trustees to consider other scoring models, and the best option without increasing the length of the exam was to move to a pass/fail system. The pass/fail scoring model is a worthwhile change for two major reasons: 1) the outcomes to date are, in effect, already pass/fail, and 2) exam content can be improved without constraints imposed by rigid grid requirements.

To maintain the hard-earned face validity of the Core Exam, the number of items will remain the same, ensuring that the entire domain of radiology is adequately evaluated. This should encourage a candidate to study across the entire field as every correct answer is valuable for passing the exam.
The Core Exam has proven to be a highly reliable and valid test of knowledge and image interpretation. The change to a pass/fail scoring system offers a chance to make a very good exam even better. However, alterations to a known process can generate anxiety about the future. The trustees understand the importance of being thoughtful and vigilant in times of change.

The new scoring model will be compared to the old one over several administrations to ensure that future outcomes mirror those of the past. We expect qualified candidates to pass the Core Exam at a rate similar to that of prior administrations.