

dear residents

Timed Tests and Timeless Learning

September 24, 2023

Dear Residents,

It's the [autumnal equinox](#). Days and nights are in balance momentarily. But the world keeps moving. This instance of celestial equipoise is fleeting but will reliably repeat itself twice a year.

As residents you have taken many **standardized and timed tests**. This has occurred throughout your career, the most recent instance being the in-training exam. At the end of your training, you will take the initial ABIM certification exam and then enter a period known as maintenance of certification. If you proceed to fellowships, most will have additional certification examinations and their own maintenance of certification requirements. Before 1990, board certification was deemed to be valid for a lifetime. After 1990, certification was time limited (currently 10 years). The rate at which new knowledge is being generated is astonishing. The shelf-life of test questions is now about 5 years. A lot changes in 10 years. Mindful of the value of staying current continuously, ABIM launched an alternative to taking a long form exam every 10 years - the [longitudinal knowledge assessment \(LKA\) pathway](#). Thirty test questions become available online every quarter. These are “open book” and need to be answered in 4 minutes. You get immediate feedback as well as links to reference materials. This pathway has been quite popular with current ABIM diplomates who have been opting 4:1 for LKA over the 10-year recertification examination.

The 4-minute limit has been queried and it turns out that most questions are answered in 2-3 minutes. Notably, rheumatologists spend the most time answering their questions (closer to 3 than 2 minutes).



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Timed tests are a standard. Wordle is untimed but I usually solve it in a couple of minutes. But sometimes I'm stuck and get back to it later in the day. Writing in the [New York Times](#), [Adam Grant](#) suggests that timed tests are as much a test of performance under pressure as they are tests of knowledge. It turns out that there is a relationship between skill and how long it takes to answer a question. [The most skilled answer the easier questions quickly but take longer for tough questions](#). The average skilled individuals have less variation between the time taken for easy or tough questions. There is evidence that if everyone was given more time, performance would improve. And paradoxically those with a longer reaction time may be the more intelligent ones! In other words, the speed with which you answer questions may not reliably correlate with intelligence. Performance on timed tests may exclude some very smart people.

I was particularly struck by Grant's concluding paragraph:

In school, timed tests teach kids that success is a sprint. But in life, success is a marathon. Wisdom is less about the speed of thought than the complexity of thinking. The students with the greatest potential aren't always the ones who can rapidly spit out the right answers. They're often the ones who take the time to ask the right questions.

There is little doubt that our skillset requires us to frequently manage urgent and emergent situations and that the pressures of productivity, patient waiting times, length of stay metrics and other such "efficiency" measures nudge us to view success as a sprint. On the other hand, the best care is delivered when we have the luxury of time and the flexibility to use our time in a manner commensurate with the complexity of the task in front of us. That this flexibility is not always readily available vexes us greatly. Our patients sense our hurriedness too. Slowing down when you can is an essential skill. Ask the important questions. Listen well. Think carefully. Follow up and follow through.

It's a hot weekend, but a cooler week awaits us. That's the promise of the equinox.

Warm regards,

Dino Kazi