

## Update on Royal College Exams

*Last updated March 27, 2020*

### Postponement of all spring 2020 examinations

- With the World Health Organization's declaration of a COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly evolving situation in Canada, all spring exam dates have been postponed for the safety for our candidates, examiners and staff, and to comply with Public Health Agency of Canada guidelines.
- Given recent discussion with health ministries, universities, faculty and resident groups, the Royal College will be postponing the delivery of its written exams to September 2020 at the earliest, with a goal to follow with the postponed spring applied (oral/OSCE) exams in the same fall period (September – November 2020).
- If this potential timeline conflicts with providing COVID-19 clinical care, we will further evaluate dates, consult with key stakeholders and be ready to respond.
- We are committed to giving at least six weeks' notice to all residents prior to exams.

### Oral/OSCE examinations

- It is our goal to administer postponed spring oral/OSCEs in the fall (September – November 2020).
- Successful written results will stand alone and will not need to be repeated in the event of a deferral or unsuccessful attempt of a 2020 oral/OSCE exam.

### Provisional licensing for residents

- We anticipate that as this pandemic evolves, the care residents provide will be essential. Provincial regulatory authorities have confirmed that they have mechanisms to provide provisional and restricted licenses to practise, given the unexpected and necessary postponement of exams and certification. Provisional and restricted licensing will vary based on the legislation of the province. Please contact your provincial medical regulatory authority for more information. Visit [www.fmrac.ca/members](http://www.fmrac.ca/members) for contact information.

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### Frequently asked questions

#### *Why is the Royal College postponing the spring 2020 written examination dates?*

- With the escalation of the COVID-19 situation to a pandemic and directives for social distancing from the Public Health Agency of Canada, we are concerned for the safety of our

candidates, examiners, staff and the public. Again, our priority is the wellness of residents and the Canadians they are caring for. We anticipate that as this pandemic evolves, the care residents provide to patients will be essential.

#### *Why can't the Royal College administer the written examinations online/by computer?*

- The Royal College's written exams are paper-based, which allows us more flexibility and responsiveness to postponement in dates than computer-based exams. Computer-based exams require software, platforms and facilities to ensure their security.

The Medical Council of Canada (MCC) and the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) have computer-based exams, which need to be administered in a secure test facility. The MCC and CFPC have also postponed their spring exams to the fall. As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, test centres may also be affected by closures due to social-distancing restrictions.

#### *Why can't an applied (oral/OSCE) examination be administered remotely (e.g. with video conferencing)?*

- Objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) are not all well-suited to a video-based format. For example, some oral/OSCEs involve interaction with a standardized patient to test clinical examination skills, meaning these exams wouldn't adhere to the social-distancing directives meant to protect candidates, standardized patients and staff.

We are currently exploring alternate channels for the delivery of applied scenarios; however, determining the operations and logistics to securely administer and proctor an applied exam by alternate channels — given our breadth of candidates, disciplines and jurisdictions — would still necessitate the postponement of such exams during this COVID-19 situation.

#### *Will I be refunded my examination fees for this postponement?*

- The Royal College still intends to administer the spring 2020 exams in the fall. If, for whatever reason, you are unable to attend the exam(s) on the rescheduled date(s) or decide to withdraw this year for any COVID-19 related reason, you will be offered a FULL refund.

#### *Should I cancel my already booked travel and accommodations for the 2020 written and oral examinations?*

- Both exam components (written and oral/OSCE) will now happen on alternate dates to those originally scheduled. In this unprecedented situation, most airlines and hotels are offering full refunds or credit for changes related to COVID-19. You should contact the airline(s) and hotel(s) you booked with for more details.

#### *What are my NEW written examination dates?*

- The Royal College is currently working to secure venues and a revised schedule to administer the spring 2020 exams in the fall. We hope that at that time the Canadian pandemic will be

resolving. We are committed to giving at least six weeks' notice to all residents prior to exams.

*Will I be able to sit my examination if I am either self-quarantined or quarantined?*

- The safety of our candidates, examiners and staff is our top priority. Candidates who are quarantined pose a risk to that safety and would need to defer their exam to the next opportunity. Candidates will be screened at registration as to their status (including recent symptoms, travel history and care of COVID-19 related patients without personal protective equipment). We expect candidates to adhere to professional codes of conduct and public health directives, and not to present for the exam if they are quarantined or symptomatic for potential COVID-19.

*Will personal protective equipment (PPE) be available at my examination?*

- Some PPE equipment and sanitizer will be available to candidates at their exams for use at their discretion, depending on supply and availability. The Royal College has distributed its current supply to health care institutions to manage the evolving COVID-19 crisis.

*If the spring examinations are being delayed to the fall, does that impact the timing of the 2020 subspecialty examinations?*

- At this moment, the timing of the fall 2020 subspecialty exams is being evaluated based on the ongoing development of COVID-19 and a recognized priority to administer the spring 2020 exams. Further communication will be shared as it becomes available.

*When will the 2020 oral/OSCE examination components be offered?*

- This applied component of the Royal College exams is dependent on the availability of expert faculty. These experts are currently required by their health systems to deliver care and, in some jurisdictions, have been directed not to travel. As this situation is evolving, we are unable at this time to do any definitive planning until the COVID-19 crisis slows and some of the aforementioned public health directives are lifted. While we are looking at the possibility of holding these exams in the fall of 2020, the evolution of the COVID-19 situation will dictate what is feasible.

### *Why can't I be certified on the basis of my written result only?*

- The Royal College has a duty to assess and certify the competence of specialist physicians and surgeons. The provincial regulatory authorities consider Royal College certification, through examinations, as the highest standard to issue a license to practise. Eliminating a component of our exam process would significantly alter those well-established standards, which have been validated across our various disciplines and are integral to upholding public trust. If an exam component were to be removed in the future, it would need to be supported by evidence, with preserved validity in the process, and requiring a deliberate and planned approach.

### *What if I need to defer my oral/OSCE examination until 2021?*

- Successful written results will stand alone and will not need to be repeated in the event of a deferral or unsuccessful attempt of a 2020 oral/OSCE exam. Prior to this situation, the committees of the Royal College had already approved moving away from a comprehensive exam approach, where written exam results would be separate from applied results and where candidates would need to demonstrate success on their written exam before presenting for the applied. This new decoupled approach has already been implemented in three disciplines: Psychiatry, Pediatrics and Internal Medicine. Given these extraordinary circumstances, we are advancing this application to all disciplines for the 2020 cycle so that successful written results will not need repeating.

### *Is the Royal College going to retroactively extend the decoupling of examinations to minimize further demand on residents, as the pandemic resolves? For example, I passed the oral/OSCE last year; am I able to write only the written examination this year?*

- In previous years, the Royal College exam was blueprinted, developed and delivered as a whole. Decisions were based on the “total” performance between the written and the applied (oral/OSCE). From 2020 onward, the written exam will stand alone; success on that exam will determine eligibility for the oral/OSCE component. Success at the written exam this year will also carry forward to future years, so that only the applied (oral/OSCE) exam will be required. This practice is new and has not been approved for retroactive application (grandfathering) to previous exam years.

### *How will a postponed examination cycle impact my license to practise?*

- We have been working with the Federation of Medical Regulatory Authorities of Canada to ensure residents can extend their licenses and continue to care for patients without interruption. Graduating residents will be eligible for a provisional / temporary / restricted license in a Canadian province provided that they have (1) confirmation of completion of postgraduate training, (2) notice of eligibility to take the certification exam and (3) understand that they must take the certification exam at the earliest opportunity. Learn more: <https://fmrac.ca/licensing-the-2020-graduating-cohorts/>

For specific information on any other requirements or conditions, all trainees are invited to

consult the website of their provincial or territorial medical regulatory authority. Visit [www.fmrac.ca/members](http://www.fmrac.ca/members) for contact information.

*How will a postponed examination cycle impact my subspecialty training or fellowship placement?*

- Starting subspecialty or fellowship training should not be dependent on the successful completion of the Royal College exams and related certification. In these extraordinary times, programs around the world are aware of the COVID-19 situation and we expect are sensitive to the circumstances preventing definitive examination and certification. Subspecialty exams will be granted in the same year as primary exams, if necessary.

*What happens if I withdraw from the 2020 examination process?*

- We recognize the challenges you may be facing in these extraordinary times. If you decide to withdraw from the 2020 exam process for any reason related to COVID-19, including feeling too overwhelmed by the situation, you will be granted a FULL refund. This withdrawal will not count as an exam attempt and will not alter your exam eligibility.

*Will there be any flexibility offered with regards to the new examination schedule, such as a choice between two exam dates in the fall, so we can keep commitments that were made prior to the schedule change?*

- As with the current process, the rescheduled written exam dates will be selected to allow for administration of the written exam for a given specialty on a single date, to ensure the validity and integrity of the exam. There may be some flexibility granted with planned dates for the rescheduled oral/OSCEs for 2020. Further communication will be shared as it becomes available.

*What about residents who will be going to the U.S. in June/July to pursue additional training or to work? How will this postponement impact ECFMG or state boards (provisional licensing is not enough – Royal College certification is required)?*

- COVID-19 is a global crisis being experienced in all jurisdictions and across borders. Training programs, globally, are sensitive to the resulting challenges in the regular/planned certification process. The United States is in the midst of the same crisis as we are and, as such, we suggest that all trainees contact their planned training programs for direction on process and the right authority with whom to discuss their options.

*Can I sit for my subspecialty examination if I haven't yet written my specialty examination because it was postponed as a result of the pandemic (e.g. write the Medical Oncology exam prior to the Internal Medicine exam)?*

- The Royal College already has a process in place by which a resident can appear for a subspecialty exam prior to a primary exam. Certification and Fellowship will only be conferred upon success at both exams.

*If I don't elect to defer my examination and I am unsuccessful at my final attempt, will the Royal College grant me another year of eligibility due to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

- We recognize that this is a stressful time for health care providers. Candidates wishing to defer their Royal College exam in 2020 may withdraw at any time, at no cost and for any COVID-19 related reason. In the case of withdrawal, it will not be considered as an exam attempt. Candidates who do present to the exam will have the "attempt" count and will lose that year of eligibility.

*If the medical regulatory authorities (MRAs) believe this examination is necessary to function as an independent specialist, why will we be eligible for provisional or restricted licenses to practise without it? If we are safe to work with provisional licensing, it seems like the Royal College and MRAs are saying the exam is not required.*

- The COVID-19 pandemic is truly an unprecedented occurrence, leading to considerable loss of human life and stress on frontline health care providers. For safety considerations, the Royal College exams could not be delivered this spring; therefore, medical regulatory authorities are issuing short-term provisional and restricted licenses to allow health care providers the opportunity to join the health workforce to care for patients at this critical time. Most medical regulatory authorities require "certification through examination" by the Royal College for an independent license to practice. Therefore, eliminating a national exam in the pathway to certification would currently fail to meet requirements of regular/unrestricted licensure in most provinces.

*This is a lot of information to take in and it seems like details keep changing. What are you doing to communicate better with candidates?*

- We have recently made changes to our email system to ensure exam candidates get important updates directly, as they become available. We are also committed to sharing a summary of key developments every week. We are open to other ideas for what would be most helpful. Please email your suggestions to [communications@royalcollege.ca](mailto:communications@royalcollege.ca).