

Getting Involved with USMLE™

The United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE™) is sponsored by the Federation of State Medical Boards of the United States, Inc. (FSMB), and the National Board of Medical Examiners® (NBME®). The three Steps of the USMLE assess a physician's ability to apply knowledge, concepts, and principles, and to demonstrate fundamental patient-centered skills, that are important in health and disease and that constitute the basis of safe and effective patient care.

The USMLE is governed by a Composite Committee, a body with membership from the Federation of State Medical Boards, the National Board of Medical Examiners, the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates, and the American public. The Composite Committee delegates many responsibilities for the USMLE Steps to the respective Step committees, which oversee test material development and interdisciplinary review committees.

The USMLE program is built upon the talent and dedication of the committee members. There are approximately 40 committees performing all USMLE functions, with over 300 members. The committee members broadly represent the teaching, practicing, and licensing communities across the United States.

Test Material Development Committees

The Test Material Development Committees develop the examination materials. Currently, membership on a

USMLE Test Material Development Committee can last from two to four years. Each year, substantial efforts are made to identify and recruit new members—the overall goal of the process being to continually refresh the pool of committee members while assuring the maintenance of quality and productivity.

The Item-writing Process

Newly appointed committee members attend a test development workshop at which NBME staff members and other committee members share techniques for developing high quality examination materials.

Committee members are given assignments to develop and submit questions or problems in areas in which they have expertise. The submitted examination materials are reviewed and revised as needed by NBME staff to ensure they adhere to high quality standards and are consistent in format and style. The proposed examination material then undergoes a subsequent review by Test Material Development Committees in face-to-face meetings at NBME offices. The Committees critically appraise each test question or case, and revise or discard any materials that are in doubt.

Many individuals who start as item writers and case developers for USMLE, and who are inclined to expand their involvement in USMLE, are given opportunities to join Interdisciplinary Review Committees (IRCs). IRCs provide further review of materials developed by

the Test Material Development Committees. Only after all reviews have been conducted does a particular question or case appear as part of the scored material in the Step examination.

Benefits of Participation

The honorarium for service on USMLE Committees is nominal. However, committee members have reported that the appeal of service on USMLE committees is more likely to come from the perception that it is a unique and rewarding educational experience, a wonderful opportunity to meet and interact with colleagues from across the country, and a chance to have a significant impact upon a system designed to protect the health of the American public. In addition, committee members can receive Category 1 continuing medical education credit for their participation on a Test Material Development Committee.

Item Harvesting

Another method of participation is through Item Harvesting. The purpose of this project is to develop test materials in targeted topic areas and to benefit from the expertise of individuals who may not have time to commit to serving on a test committee. Participants receive materials from the NBME indicating topics, the number of questions needed, and information about the style and format of USMLE questions. Each participant submits draft questions to

the NBME office, where the items are reviewed and readied for pretesting. Usually, no additional contact is necessary.

Contact information

Nominations for membership on test material development committees are welcome from medical licensing boards, medical schools, professional societies, and individuals; self-nominations are also welcome. Nominations for membership should include a brief summary of the qualifications of the nominee. Nominations should be sent to David Johnson, M.A., Senior Director of Examination Services, Federation of State Medical Boards, PO Box 619850, Dallas, Texas 75261-9850

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