Author's response to reviews

Title: Changes in standard of candidates taking the MRCP(UK) Part 1 examination, 1985 to 2002: Analysis of marker questions

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Response to Reviewer

We thank the reviewer for her generous comments, and are glad that the paper is now suitable for publication. We have chosen not to alter our manuscript on the matter of the interpretation of the role of examination factors in the changes we have found, but believe a few more comments may be helpful for the interested reader.

The reviewer is correct that we have primarily concentrated on candidate and training factors, rather than examination factors in our interpretation of the results. In so far as the questions are constant across occasions, then any change in standards cannot be a result of differences in the questions per se. However we accept that the differences may reflect differences in the interpretation, meaning or importance of the questions. To take an extreme example, a hypothetical true-false question from the London MRCP in the mid-nineteenth century may have expected a positive answer to a question about the role of leeches in the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis (and the influential nineteenth century textbook of Sir Thomas Watson, PRCP, said that "a leech or two" is beneficial in phthisis), whereas a negative answer would have been expected to the same question in the early twenty-first century. It may be that the changes we are describing here are due to similar changes in the understanding of good and effective clinical practice, although we doubt it. The substance of good medical practice does of course change, but it rarely changes as rapidly or dramatically as appears to the case in our figure 2. We can only rest our case by once more asserting that to us and to the clinical examiners of the MRCP, neither the answers nor the clinical importance of the questions shown in table 1 hardly changed between 1991 and 2001, and yet the knowledge of the candidates did. The reader must determine for themselves whether changes in practice or knowledge can adequately explain those differences, or further research evidence must be collected and presented.