
For this session (2013-2014), there were three sets of exam papers that I was asked to deal with. The first two, which included an MCQ paper and a Practical paper, counted towards the Second MB/Second Veterinary MB Mechanisms of Drug Action exams. The third, which involved an essay paper, counted along with the first two towards the Tripos Part IB. In addition, I was also asked to check through the exam papers for the options courses “Man, Molecules and the Environment” and “Use and Abuse: Pharmacology of Janus Drugs”.

I received the question papers (with answers where appropriate) in March and had a few queries and comments, which were promptly dealt with by the Senior Examiner.

The MCQ paper is thorough and wide ranging, and is an appropriate test (counts for 75% of the Second MB mark) of the Mechanisms of Drug Action, i.e. covers the basic scientific information a clinician needs to know about how the drugs they are prescribing work. Most aspects of pharmacology are covered, including receptor theory and pharmacokinetics. The only significant area not covered in this exam is neuropharmacology, which is taught elsewhere in the course.

The Practical paper is composed of two questions, one covering basic receptor theory/mechanisms, and the other pharmacokinetics. These questions are well constructed, and tested in large part the numerical skills of the students, along with their ability to think about drug action. I applaud the focus on numeracy with medical and veterinary students. The question setters may, for clarity, wish to consider dividing the question into numbered/lettered sections with the marks for that section being clearly shown.

The exam mark spreadsheet was explained to me in detail during my visit, as well as the use of scaling, which was in my view satisfactory. In addition all exam scripts were available for me to look at during my time in Cambridge, if I so wished.

I was given a number of sets of scripts to look over, including ones around the pass/fail borderline of 50%. In my opinion the borderline of pass/fail is a fair one and I was satisfied
that this mark fairly distinguished those who passed from those who failed the Second MB (about 8% of the cohort).

In addition I was given sets of scripts reflecting different levels of achievement in the Tripos Part IB, including the highest firsts, scripts from the 2.1/1st borderline, the 2.2/2.1 borderline, as well as scripts that were clear fails (<40%). Overall I was very happy with the standard of marking. The highest firsts were extremely good students with exceptionally well written, focussed and detailed essays, achieving a very high standard. It would be helpful for markers to indicate on the script points that are correct, points that are over and above what might be expected, and points that are incorrect or irrelevant (although this may not be in line with University policy).

I have no significant criticisms of the exam papers or the quality of the assessment. My only points for discussion relate to making the exam easier for the staff to assess. In short, the present form of the Practical paper could be replaced with one that is optically marked, using Extended Matching Questions, or a form of MCQ based on having to manipulate and interpret data. However, if the academic staff are happy with the way things are now, then that is fine.

I would like to thank the Senior Examiner and other members of the Department of Pharmacology for their hospitality, courtesy and efficiency.

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MVST IB MV (Mechanisms of Drug Action) September sitting

For this sitting (September 2014), there were two sets of 2nd MB/2nd Vet MB exam papers that I was asked to deal with; an MCQ paper and a Practical paper. I received the question papers (with answers where appropriate) in early September and had a few queries and comments, which were promptly dealt with by the Senior Examiner.

The MCQ paper was an appropriate test of the Mechanisms of Drug Action, i.e. covered the basic scientific information a clinician needs to know about how the drugs they are prescribing work. Most aspects of pharmacology were covered. The Practical paper was composed of two questions, one covering basic receptor theory/mechanisms, and the other being a data interpretation-type question. These questions were well constructed, and tested in large part the numerical skills of the students, along with their ability to think about drug action. Overall the exam was a fair test of knowledge and understanding of the subject, and the level of difficulty was in my opinion about the same as the May/June exam.

The Senior Examiner forwarded to me the marksheet following the exams and we subsequently discussed the marks by telephone. I had no significant issues or concerns to report and was happy with the final outcome:
For 2nd MB there were 17 passes and 4 fails
For 2nd Vet there are 7 passes and 3 fails

I approved the pass/fail list and the marksheet.

I would like to thank the Senior Examiner Dr Hiley for his courtesy and efficiency.

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30th October 2014