

FAQ

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Supporting a registrar who has failed fellowship exams

RACGP exam preparation and failure can cause enormous stress for many registrars, and for various reasons, some registrars fail the same exam multiple times.

This resource aims to help you support your registrar to prepare effectively for their next exam attempt.

How can I help my registrar deal with the disappointment/stress of failing a Fellowship exam, and to avoid repeat failures?

Initially, you should debrief with your registrar about their exam preparation, technique, mental health and wellbeing. It's also important to acknowledge and appreciate the stress levels many registrars experience before and/or during the exam.

You can provide ongoing support in the following ways:

- Direct the registrar to the relevant policies and procedures relating to RACGP exams.
- Help the registrar develop a personalised exam study plan, focusing on their weak areas.
- Facilitate the registrar's incorporation of clinical reasoning skills into everyday practices.
- Monitor the registrar's mental health and wellbeing following a failed exam, and while preparing to re-sit the exam.

My registrar failed an exam despite studying intensely. What advice can I offer to optimise their study to successfully re-sit the exam, and pass subsequent exams?

Many registrars who fail exams do so because they separated their exam study from general practice, rather than integrating the two components. So, when debriefing with your registrar after a failed exam, you should emphasise the importance of incorporating their exam preparation in their day-to-day general practice, particularly in the development of their clinical reasoning.

For example, you could advise:

"To succeed in college exams, you need to do well at general practice."

That is, the exam is not far removed from a general practice setting. So, good preparation for an exam includes practising good clinical reasoning skills in a wide variety of cases during your day-to-day general practice."

My registrar failed an exam despite being a good clinician and studying effectively. So, how do I help my registrar target the area which needs improvement?

While your registrar needs sound medical knowledge and clinical reasoning to pass their exam, they also need to understand and practise exam technique. Ensuring they learn particular exam rules and strategies will make it more likely they pass their next attempt at the exam.

How can registrars learn and practise exam technique?

Registrars need exposure to exam preparation courses or workshops. You should encourage them to avail themselves to these opportunities, and support them with time-off if travel time is required to attend these learning events.

Who provides learning support for exam technique?

Available options include:

- Most Regional Training Organisations (RTOs) provide exam support, particularly on learning exam technique. If your registrar is involved in an RTO, you should highly encourage them to participate in any opportunity provided for exam preparation.
- The RACGP also offers webinars and face-to-face workshops. In addition to RTO learning opportunities, also encourage your registrar to do at least one of the RACGP activities for an overview of what to prepare for.
- Exam Support Online (ESO) modules are available for all registrars.
- Private providers can also provide additional help, particularly for registrars outside the AGPT program. However, this is an expensive and not a "must-do" option.

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My registrar only just failed the exam. Is it worth appealing the decision?

There is usually a clustering of results around the pass mark: that is, registrars who just pass or, just fail. The robust marking procedure means a fail is a fail - even if it is by just 0.1 per cent - and a just pass is closer to a borderline fail than a competent pass. For this reason, your registrar's exam mark is unlikely to be altered if they appeal the decision.

Therefore, unless there has been a procedural error reported at the time of the exam, it is not worth appealing the decision. Registrars who apply for reconsideration will be charged a fee, which is mostly refunded if their application is successful. But take note, a procedural error will only be applicable if the error was reported at the time of the exam.

Can my registrar apply for special consideration if they or a family member was ill, or there was a family tragedy or death before the exam?

If a registrar sits the exam, they are deemed fit to sit the exam, so no special consideration will be given for their exam mark. However, if the registrar does not sit the exam and provides documentation to support the reason for their absence, they can apply to be considered for a refund on their exam fee.

The only exception to applying for special consideration on the exam's mark is if an unforeseen circumstance occurs during the exam. For example, an accident or the registrar's health suddenly deteriorates.

Are there special considerations a registrar can apply for before the exam?

Yes. Registrars can apply for special considerations before the exam, but this must be done well in advance of the exam.

Examples of special considerations include, but are not limited to, needing extra time if they need to breastfeed, eat for medical or pregnancy reasons, are dyslexic or have a learning disability, cultural safety, etc. Furthermore, if the registrar needs special consideration for issues such as allergies (for example, to latex) or anything else that could affect their exam performance, encourage your registrar to apply for these considerations early via the special consideration form available on the college website.

For more information, visit <https://www.racgp.org.au/education/fellowship/fellowship-of-the-racgp/policies/policies/racgp-examinations-special-consideration-policy/>

Will registrars receive exam feedback from RACGP?

Yes. Feedback is conducted by RACGP censors and censor assistants. The current (2018) feedback process is:

1. **PUBLIC EXAM REPORT** – see publish dates and download PDFs at www.racgp.org.au/education/fellowship/exams/exam-results/
2. **GROUP FEEDBACK** – available (via webinar) to candidates who fail the exam twice.
3. **INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK** – available to candidates who fail the exam three times.

The exam feedback process, is reviewed and updated regularly, with the next update likely to occur in 2019.

What feedback will the public exam report provide?

The public exam report gives information about the common errors and outcomes of each cohort performance.

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Why is individual feedback not provided until a registrar fails an exam three times?

The sheer number of exam candidates who sit the exam, make it unworkable to give individual feedback to all candidates who fail. For example, of the 1439 candidates who sat a KFP exam in 2018, between 40 to 45 per cent failed that exam alone.

What study plan tips can a supervisor give their registrar if they have failed one, or more, exams?

It is not possible for a registrar to read and study every learning resource, nor guideline in Australian Family Physician (AFP), so advise your registrar to focus on content study, rather than resource study. Therefore, encourage them to:

1. Identify knowledge gaps - include what they do and don't see in day-to-day general practice.
2. Start from weakest topics.
3. Read Murtagh.
4. Study around patients - integrate study with developing clinical reasoning skills during day-to-day general practice.
5. Practise exam question technique.
6. Review important guidelines on areas of weakness or knowledge gaps. For example, if a registrar identifies polycystic ovary syndrome as an area of weakness, encourage them to read current Australian guidelines on that topic in Australian Family Physician at www.racgp.org.au/afp/

Can supervisors access the Exam Support Online (ESO) modules?

Yes. While the ESO modules were once only available to exam candidates, the modules are now available to all RACGP members via gplearning at www.racgp.org.au/gplearning

The eight modules are free and can be done online any time.

Will it benefit the registrar if their GP supervisor also reads/completes the ESO modules?

Yes. While registrars should complete the ESO modules, they can be well supported by a supervisor who has also worked through the modules. The interactive modules provide the following:

- Overview of the RACGP Fellowship exams.
- Tips on how to prepare for exams, exam technique and resources.
- Tips and practice questions for Applied Knowledge Test (AKT), Key Feature Problems (KFP), and Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE).



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How can I help my registrar develop their clinical reasoning?

Random case analysis (RCA) is a powerful teaching tool for developing clinical reasoning and reflection on the five domains of general practice, which are all tested in the KFP.

2 APPLIED PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

- Common and serious medical conditions
- Undifferentiated problems
- Uncertainty
- Clinical decision making
- Rational investigation ordering
- Rational prescribing
- Appropriate referral
- Follow-up and safety netting
- Use of evidence

3 POPULATION HEALTH AND THE CONTEXT OF GENERAL PRACTICE

- Prevention and screening
- Public health focus

4 PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL ROLE

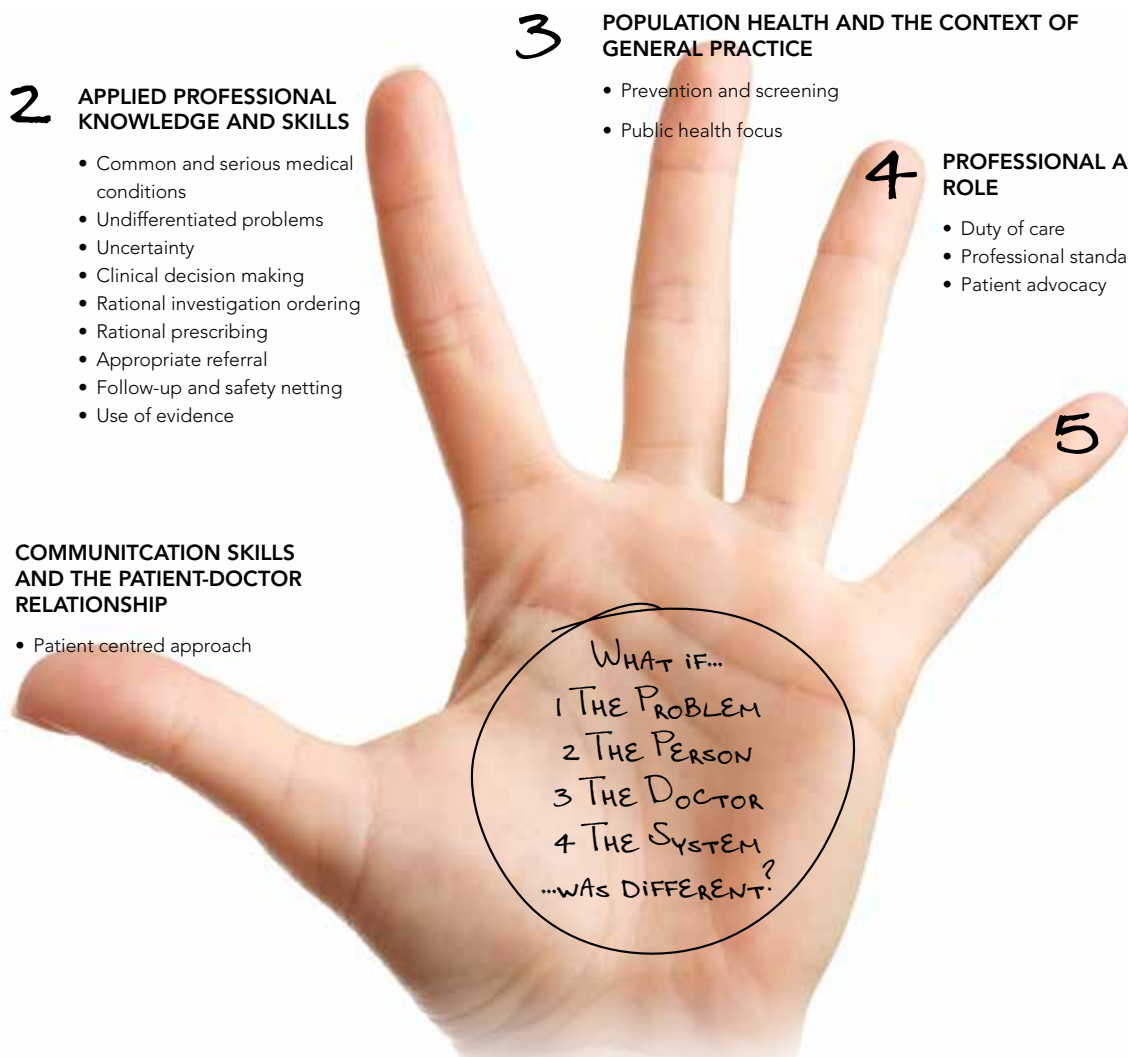
- Duty of care
- Professional standards
- Patient advocacy

5 ORGANISATIONAL AND LEGAL DIMENSIONS

- Medical records
- Recall and reminder systems
- Time management
- Certification

1 COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND THE PATIENT-DOCTOR RELATIONSHIP

- Patient centred approach



For more information about RCA, see:

- Random case analysis: A new framework for Australian general practice training: www.racgp.org.au/afp/2013/januaryfebruary/random-case-analysis/
- Random Case Analysis in General Practice guide: <http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/guides/>
- Random Case Analysis - Frequently Asked Questions: <http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/frequently-asked-questions-more/>
- Using Random Case Analysis as a Supervision Tool webinar <http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/educational-resources/webinar-recordings/>

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How can I adapt RCA to KFP preparation?

FOCUS ON FIVE DOMAINS

Many registrars who fail the KFP have focused on the medical management domain, and were not prepared for the remaining domains, especially domains 3 to 5.

So, if you are supervising a registrar preparing for their KFP, it is important to incorporate exploratory questions which cover all the domains, and teach your registrar to look at aspects they may not have considered. For example, consider Domain 3: Population health and the context of general practice.

Example questions for this domain are:

- *“What is the most likely cause of this particular presentation in this particular patient population?”*
- *“What are the potential implications for the patient’s family and the wider community?”*
- *“Which, if any, opportunistic preventive interventions or screening tests did you discuss?”*

CHANGE THE CONTEXT

Your RCA discussion may be about a simple case, for example a 20-year-old who presented with a tension headache. By changing the context, you can extend the discussion into a teaching session about different kinds of headaches, as further exam preparation.

For example, you may ask the registrar the following:

- *“What happens if something was different? If instead of being a 20-year-old male, what happens if the same presentation was a 75-year-old female?”*
- *“What happens if instead of it being a headache with no neurological signs, if there are some neurological signs? How would that change the differential?”*
- *“What happens if there is a history of a fall, or the patient had a fever?”*
- *“What if they were allergic to that medication? What would you give instead?”*

CREATE A KFP FROM THE RCA

You can further extend your registrar’s preparation for the exam by devising a KFP from the RCA. The college KFP will ask for a specific number of responses to each question, so you can help your registrar practise exam technique by also asking for a specific number of responses.

For example, instead of simply asking, *“What were you thinking?”* you could ask the following:

- *“What are five things you would look for in the history?”*
- *“What are three examinations you would do?”*
- *“What are four differentials?”*

This technique of case analysis and asking for a specific number of answers can start as early as a registrar’s first term in general practice. It will help develop their clinical reasoning and give them practice at prioritising answers, in preparation for the KFP. You can also encourage your registrar to practise this case analysis technique with their peers in a study group.

Does GPSA provide resources which can support my teaching of specific topics, and test my registrar’s knowledge and applications of the same?

Yes. GPSA has a range of teaching plans and clinical reasoning challenges, which are developed by GP supervisors and medical educators. Teaching plans may be updated after your initial download, so it is important you re-download a specific plan if using it with another registrar at a later date.

If you are short on teaching time (as may happen on occasions), you could also direct your registrar to this resource, and follow-up with a discussion on the topic later.

Download GPSA teaching plans at:

<http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/teaching-plans/>

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My registrar failed the AKT and KFP last year and immediately re-sat both soon after, against my advice, and failed both again. How do you teach insight?

You need to highlight the registrar's cognitive dissonance by getting them to self-reflect.

For example, if your registrar says, "I don't understand why I've failed because I'm excellent at all my areas," you can explain how their reflection doesn't match the evidence.

For example, you may reply, "In the last three attempts you have been in the bottom 2 per cent of candidates, so how can you rationalise you being exceptional in all areas of medicine and being in the bottom 2 per cent?"

In a clinical setting, you can teach insight by giving clinical reasoning challenges, for example through RCA. Hopefully this will help your registrar understand they need help with clinical reasoning.

For more information, see:

- **Teaching Clinical Reasoning guide at:**
<http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/guides/>
- **Teaching Clinical Reasoning webinar at:**
<http://gpsupervisorsaustralia.org.au/educational-resources/webinar-recordings/>
- **IM Reasoning podcast at:**
<http://imreasoning.com/>

Why is anyone allowed to sit an exam more than six times?

RACGP is in the process of capping exam attempts and limits are likely to come into effect from 2019 onwards for new candidates. This should not impact current candidates.

At the moment (2018) there is just cause process by which a candidate who has failed three exam attempts has to prove they should sit again, and there is a remediation program for candidates who fail six attempts. Changes currently (2018) being negotiated are looking at implementing the remediation process earlier and capping exam attempts.

Are there any administration tips I can give my registrar who is preparing to re-sit an exam?

Ensure your registrar knows when enrolments close for various components of Fellowship exams – and urge them to enrol on time!

Registrars will not be allowed to sit the exam if they miss the enrolment date, so urge your registrar to be familiar – and act on – important dates.

For exam enrolment dates, visit: <https://www.racgp.org.au/education/fellowship/exams/exam-enrolments/>

My registrar has run out of training time. Can he/she still enrol for any/all exam components?

If your registrar has run out of training time, but enrolls in all of the exams before they exit the program, they can still sit as a registrar. This includes enrolling in the OSCE. If they fail AKT and KFP attempts and don't qualify for the OSCE, they will be refunded their enrolment fee, however they must enrol in any component they have not yet passed **BEFORE** they leave the program.

Why does an exam candidate need to enrol as a registrar?

It becomes a real issue if a registrar runs out of training time and they have not yet sat their exams.

Firstly, a registrar who runs out of training time will not have a Medicare provider number, unless they move to another training program.

While there are rural relief, special access, and Special Approved Placements Program (SAP) programs which allow Medicare items, Fellowship candidates cannot enrol for the exams unless they have fulfilled other pathway requirements. For example, if enrolling for the exam under the SAP program, the exam candidate will need to have four years' experience in general practice. A registrar in the AGPT program requires two years of general practice experience.

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How can I ensure my registrar does not run out of training time and miss sitting an exam(s) under the AGPT program?

- Encourage your registrar to study hard, early.
- Support your registrar in developing their clinical reasoning.
- Help your registrar get as much insight as possible after their first, and any consecutive, failed exam.
- Encourage and role model self-care.

Can my registrar apply for an extension on their training time if they have failed an exam(s)?

There is a six-month extension available in AGPT if a registrar fails their exam and has not taken an earlier extension in their training. This extension is approved via the registrar's RTO. In exceptional circumstances an extension may be approved for an extra six months. But generally speaking, extension approvals are getting tighter, so registrars can expect only one extension per training term.

These extensions are in calendar months, not the full-time equivalent. Therefore, a part-time registrar can apply for a six-month calendar extension, not six months part-time.

Is there anything I can do to help my registrar manage the stress of exam failure, and preparing to re-sit the exam?

Preparing for an exam is a very stressful time for many registrars, especially after an exam failure.

It is important to support your registrar manage this stress by encouraging self-care and if necessary, accommodating extra time for study. You can help your registrar by:

- Have the discussion, "Healthy living is vital – don't sacrifice sleep, diet, exercise."
- Incorporate study into their clinical work. That is, "study" while they are seeing patients. For example, by looking up guidelines, or thinking about exam questions in relation to their clinical work, etc. If necessary, reduce the registrar's work hours to accommodate extra study time.
- Acknowledge there are significant stresses associated with exams, and direct your registrar to resources/support services which they could access.

What resources/supports are available to help my registrar manage stress?

You can advise your registrar to medical/psychological support from:

- Their own GP (not you).
- Doctor's Health Advisory Service – 24-hour helpline. Phone 3833 4352.
- eMH programs at <http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/guidelines/e-mental-health/>
- RACGP GP support program – free confidential counselling by psychologists for RACGP members. Phone 1300 366 789.
- <http://jmohealth.org.au> "Are you OK?" Wellbeing website for junior doctors.
- <http://beyondblue.org.au>

If you are concerned about your registrar's stress level and exam preparation, advise their RTO and medical educator.

Performance anxiety contributed to my registrar's exam failure? How can they learn to maximise their performance before re-sitting the exam and doing the OSCE?

Significant numbers of registrars fail written exams, or the OSCE, because of performance anxiety. You could advise they seek some professional psychology to turn this around, so they maximise their performance next time.

- The RACGP GP support program, which provides free confidential counselling by psychologists and does not require a mental health care plan, is often used by registrars needing to overcome performance anxiety. The service is available to all RACGP members. Phone 1300 366 789.
- Performance psychologists who work with sportspeople and other specialities, can be accessed via mediums such as SKYPE.