

Hello everyone. My name is Abdelrahman Abusaif. I am a medical graduate of Suez Canal University, Egypt, class of 2016. I received my Step 2 CK result about 3 weeks ago. The experiences in this group helped me very much during my preparation so I thought that I should write my own experience to help other colleagues.

Date of Exam: 18/4/2018

Score: 261

Step 1 Not Done Yet

### **SELF-ASSESSMENTS:**

- NBME 7: 256, NBME 6: 262 (done back-to-back at the same day) => 5 weeks before exam
- UWSA 1: 269 => 4 weeks before exam
- NBME 8: 271 => 3 weeks before exam
- UWSA 2: 260 => 10 days before the exam (omitted 4 questions due to inadequate time management. However, it was the most predictive self-assessment)

### **RESOURCES:**

- Most of Kaplan videos [Most important are Internal Medicine videos + Biostatistics & Ethics videos for step 1]
- Most of Kaplan Lecture Notes (about 2 times)
- Most of Uworld (about 2 times)
  - 1st time: offline 2016 version, untimed, system & subjectwise, along with Kaplan 2nd run; I used to read the chapter in Kaplan then do its UW questions
  - 2nd time: online, timed, random, along with taking extensive notes [85% correct]
- CMS Forms: only did 8 forms out of the total 27 forms (ie, less than 1/3 of them) [average of 5 mistakes per form]
- Other Q-Banks / Q-Books: some of UW for step 3, some of Kaplan Q-Book, some of FA Q&A (I did these during studying Kaplan notes & I didn't even read the explanations for most of them even the incorrect answers; I was just getting familiar with the clinical scenarios & trying to reinforce the clinical concepts by practice)
- Flashcards: some of Conrad Fisher Flashcards (during Kaplan 1st & 2nd runs), Anki (I started to use it in the last 1/3 of the 2nd run of UW)

### **DON'T WORRY IF:**

- You didn't do Step 1 first (I didn't do it. In addition, I had very wide gaps in my basic science knowledge from medical school so that didn't help either)
- You are a slow learner (I am a VERY slow learner, what matters in the end is your score)
- You didn't finish UW or any other resource that you planned to finish before the exam (I have a bad habit of never completing any given task I plan to do; I never completed any of the above-mentioned resources. I didn't even complete Uworld in both 1st & 2nd runs with more than 300 questions left. Quality of study matters as much as quantity.) => However, if you want to take the exam without completing the standard resources, at

least be guided by multiple self-assessments to be sure that you can easily get the score you want.

- You started late (I started the study for step 2 CK more than 2 years after the last clinical exam in medical school & I didn't even consider studying for USMLE before.)

### **THE BURDEN OF TAKING NOTES FROM UWORLD:**

I think that the most annoying part of step 2 CK preparation is taking notes from UW since there's no reliable book to serve as the frame to which you add notes in step 2 CK (like FA in step 1).

- I initially printed old UW tables & tried to write down notes related to these tables beside them but that took a huge amount of time since I was searching for the relevant table for each piece of information - and usually, there are many tables that feel relevant – then write down the notes beside it. I don't advise you to do that. Not only you will be exceedingly slow, but you will not be able to search these notes on your computer later on.
- Then I tried to write notes in word documents divided by system/subject but I also felt it's a waste of time since I type slow. This works for many people. At least you can quickly search your notes when you need.
- After that, I took screenshots of explanations (this is the fastest method) but felt there will be a huge amount of screenshots at the end that I will have no time for revising and it doesn't differ much from reviewing the blocks on the Uworld app.
- Finally, I started to use Anki to write notes & at the same time revise these notes by Anki's wonderful revision algorithm (2 birds with one stone) but this also took a huge amount of time especially that I felt that in every question there's a new valuable piece of information that must be written down or I would forget it. Sometimes I would make many Anki cards for one question. This really slowed down very much & I felt overwhelmed & like I am sinking into a big ocean.
- In the end, I didn't have time to revise any notes I had taken whether handwritten notes, word documents or screenshots so I think that was a total waste of time. The only notes that I revised were those that I made into Anki cards & these covered only about 1/4 of the Uworld.

Conclusion:

- (1) Decide what you will write down before starting UW so that you don't feel lost in the huge amount of information offered in UWorld's rich explanations (e.g, you can decide to write down every educational objective, every new idea even if it isn't related to the question, every wrong question idea even if you knew it before ... etc, decide for yourself but be flexible).
- (2) Start taking notes from the UW from the 1st run (at least from the wrong questions) so that you don't feel overwhelmed in the 2nd run.
- (3) You have to learn how to be selective in taking notes and to stop being obsessive about everything. I felt that this dragged me down during my preparation (Mostly d.t. the overemphasis of previous examinees on the importance of every little detail in UW. Relax, it isn't like that).
- (4) Use whatever method you like, but I felt that using Anki to write down notes was the most useful method because it allows you to revise your notes daily in increasingly spaced out intervals so that you never forget them. In addition, you can search & edit any of your notes in a few seconds.

## **LAST WEEKS / DAYS BEFORE EXAM:**

I didn't do anything special because I felt that cramming is not going to help me in the real exam. I continued my usual daily schedule of solving Uworld, solving some CMS forms when I get bored of UW. I solved FRED questions 2 days before the exam (got 90% correct) & tried to relax as much as possible in the day before the exam. The night of the exam I took 2 diphenhydramine pills to help me fall asleep. That didn't help much because I only slept 4 hours.

## **EXAM:**

I don't remember much about the exam but it felt like a general knowledge exam where cramming is not going to help you much (just like in Slumdog Millionaire, the movie).

I reached the Prometric center 2 hours early & I didn't know what to do so I called a friend & made him explain to me some topics that I didn't have time to study like vitamins, minerals, developmental milestones ... etc but none of these topics showed up in the exam.

Therefore, I think that cramming is counterproductive especially that it raises your anxiety just before the exam & exhausts your mental energy & you will definitely need as much mental energy in your exam as you can possibly savor.

The exam is too long & exhausting & I think that nobody can remember the distribution of subjects/systems in the exam in a helpful manner. People usually tend to remember the areas in which they screwed up in & they overemphasize these areas. However, remember that the weak areas are frequently the same topics among most medical students.

For example, I felt that the questions related to preventive medicine, ethics, biostatistics & basic sciences (genetics, immunology, anatomy & infectious diseases) were too hard but that only reflects my weaker areas rather than the topics emphasized by the exam.

## **BREAK TIME MANAGEMENT IN EXAM:**

Here's a grave mistake I made that I don't want you to make. I initially planned to take a long break after the 4th block and then smaller breaks after the 5th, 6th & 7th blocks. However, I had to take a break after the 3rd block to go to the bathroom and then I took my time to drink coffee, eat snacks & pray. I didn't look at the time because I assumed that I would finish fast. However, when I returned, I was shocked to see that there's only 1 minute left in the total break time so I had to solve the last 5 blocks back-to-back without any time for rest except for a few seconds. That was VERY stressful & degrading to my performance. So, I advise you to look at your clock in the break time to calculate how much time you spent. To save precious break time, I advise you to take only 1 long break & take your other breaks without going out; just stretch your body while on the chair & relax. Plan for longer break time toward the end of the exam when you feel most exhausted.

## **POST-EXAM:**

The days following the exam, I felt that I screwed up because of simple mistakes like inadequate break time management & not giving enough time to some tricky but workable questions. I feared that the time and effort I spent in studying will be wasted & I would get a score below my average self-assessments. However, I assured myself that most people experience that feeling & by the fact that my performance in the self-assessments was relatively consistent.

## STARTING WITH STEP 2 CK:

There's a general consensus among USMLE examinees that Step 1 is harder than Step 2 CK, especially since that all AMGs & most IMGs take step 1 first so when they start studying for step 2 CK, they already have learned a good deal of relevant facts & learning strategies as well as have already become familiar with the USMLE questions' style.

Most IMGs start with step 1 because it's intuitive to start building your knowledge from the base upwards. However, I preferred to start with step 2 CK for the following reasons:

- (1) I wanted to give myself a psychological "push-up" by starting with the easier step, especially since I noticed that many of my friends became frustrated during the study for step 1 & many IMGs even completely give up because they are intimidated by the tremendous amount of information that needs to be memorized & understood in step 1.
- (2) Another thing is that I felt that since there's much overlap between the 2 steps, I preferred to study the material in low-resolution first then in high-resolution. What I mean is that step 2 CK doesn't require you to memorize the gory details of the diseases but rather to be able to recognize and differentiate between the different common diseases & their basic treatment without diving into details (ie, low-resolution picture). In contrast, step 1 requires you to deeply understand & memorize the tiny details in the pathophysiology of the diseases (ie, high-resolution picture). So, I preferred to start with the big picture (ie, step 2 CK) then dive into the details (ie, step 1).
- (3) If Step 1 is the hard step & Step 2 CK is the "easy" one and doing any step will make the next step easier, then it's logical to start with the "easy" one to make the hard step easier.
- (4) Lastly, and this is related to the first point, I had a relatively better grasp of the clinical material in medical school much more than the basic sciences. So, I felt that it's better to start with the clinical material so it can be a "step-up" to the basic sciences which I am very weak in.

That being said, the order in which to do the steps depends totally on you. If you feel you have an iron will that doesn't break easily and the ability to memorize a huge amount of tiny details, then you can start step 1 without any problems. However, if you are like me, then maybe you should consider starting with step 2 CK.

I advise those of you starting with step 2 to download a digital copy of First Aid for USMLE Step 1 & refer to it using the search function in the pdf whenever you encounter a topic in UW explanations that you don't understand its pathophysiology well. Don't worry about the details, just understand the pathophysiology of the disease so you can summarize it in one sentence only. That's actually all you need because the choices in many questions are in the form of the basic pathophysiology of the disease not the name of the disease (e.g. instead of the choice being "myasthenia gravis", it will be "auto-immune disease due to antibodies against postsynaptic acetylcholine receptors"). I didn't do that except in some neurology topics (e.g. aphasia) but I feel that this strategy can be beneficial.

## DIFFICULT USMLE TOPICS

These topics related to step 1 gave me especially hard time:

- (1) Immune deficiency disorders & transfusion reactions (need a strong basis in immunology) => Don't worry about the immunological details. You just need to know what is written in UW tables about these topics. There are many similar disorders that will need repetition until you can easily understand the difference between them. You can refer to FA to understand how the immune system works but that's not really necessary.
- (2) Infections (need a strong basis in microbiology) => Try to know the classification algorithm of bacteria from FA. Learn the most common pathogens in different infections & the antibiotic of choice in each case. For parasitic & fungal infections, the Uworld tables are good but again these will need repetition due to many similarities between them.
- (3) Hematology (need a strong basis in pathology)
- (4) Localization of CNS lesions & recognizing the affected artery.
- (5) Acid-base, fluids & electrolytes.
- (6) ECGs & Heart Sounds
- (7) Vitamins, Minerals & Glycogen Storage Diseases (need a strong basis in biochemistry) => Uworld is enough. Don't worry too much about them because they are much lower-yield than other common topics.

I realized that these topics give anyone a hard time. The only difference is that those starting with step 1 had their hard time studying these topics in step 1 so they became familiar with these topics in step 2 CK. So, don't be frustrated and think that it was a mistake not to start with step 1 when you encounter difficulty in these topics or other ones that depend on basic science knowledge.

The above-mentioned topics are covered very well in UW, but the problem is that they are scattered everywhere - even if you solve UW systemwise - so you can't really compare similar disorders & know the difference between them easily. If you haven't done step 1 before, you will be confused when solving questions related to these topics. That's why I advise you to refer to FA for Step 1 every now & then because the confusing disorders are compared in neat tables that can give you an idea of what's going on.

Well, that's most of what I can remember about my experience.

Good luck, fellow doctors.