The USMLE: a guide for New Zealand medical students and graduates

Going to the United States (US) for training has both its advantages and disadvantages. Personal factors, long-term goals and financial matters need to be considered before making a decision.\(^1\) Acceptance into US specialist training programmes and many clinical fellowships requires passing a number of exams, collectively known as the USMLE.

The USMLE stands for the United States Medical Licensing Examination. It comprises a series of examinations for the medical licensure and subsequent practice in the US. It is made up of three steps and four exams. The candidate (i.e. medical student or graduate) has to take each exam separately, but in any order.\(^2\)

Traditionally, New Zealand (NZ) medical graduates have chosen the US (or the United Kingdom) for fellowship and post-fellowship training. A number of younger medical graduates, however, are choosing to do their basic specialist training (also known as residency training) in the US.

To apply, non-US medical students/graduates (e.g. from NZ) must follow the steps outlined on the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) website (www.ecfmg.org). For NZ medical students, some forms may need to be verified by the Medical School Officer. Below are the contact details for NZ’s two medical schools:

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<tr>
<th>University of Otago</th>
<th>University of Auckland</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruce R Smith</td>
<td>Kate Snow</td>
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<td>Faculty Manager</td>
<td>Student Services Manager</td>
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<td>Faculty of Medicine</td>
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<td>Sayers Building</td>
<td>Grafton Campus</td>
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<td>Phone (03) 479 5057</td>
<td>Phone (09) 923 6516</td>
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The only test centre (formally called the Prometric Centre) in NZ is located in the St George’s Institute of Learning in Auckland. St George’s Institute also offers English language classes, so some noise during the exam is expected (ear plugs are provided if you decide to use them.) The exam area has five computers, which are also used for other exams. Therefore, it is wise to apply and book for an exam 4–5 months in advance.

**Step 1:** This multiple choice question (MCQ)-exam is deemed the most difficult of all the USMLE Steps. This is mainly because basic sciences tend to be abstract and theoretical, whereas clinical sciences (which are more heavily tested in the other Steps) are something medical students and graduates relate to more easily.
The best advice for anyone preparing for Step 1 is as follows:

- Allow enough time to go over the material at least twice.
- Do as many practice MCQs as possible.
- Use study material that has received good feedback from students who have already done the exam (e.g. First Aid for Step 1, USMLEWorld QBank).

**Step 2 Clinical knowledge:** This exam is better taken after doing all the necessary runs which are medicine, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics and psychiatry. For students in NZ, a good time is after fifth year examinations where knowledge is still fresh. Some opt to do the exam during their house officer years. Similar to Step 1, MCQ banks are helpful in preparation for this exam, and it can be done in the Prometric Centre in Auckland.

**Step 2 Clinical skills:** Clinical skills exam is essentially a 12-station Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) requiring a fifth year/Trainee Intern (TI) level of knowledge. As this test must be done in the US, we advice examinees to prepare for at least 2 months prior to the exam with repeated practice. A good time to take the exam is while on elective after fifth year, or during a holiday while a doctor.

**Step 3:** This exam is the last of the USMLE series of exams. It largely tests a candidate’s ability to integrate all the clinical sciences and medical knowledge gathered whilst in medical school and apply them in a simulated unsupervised setting. Step 3 is the single exam that could only be taken after graduation, and can be likened to Part One of specialist training programmes in Australasia.

For NZ medical **students**, the “best time” to sit any of the Steps varies from one student to another. Some prefer to sit Step 1 after third year since basic sciences are relatively fresh in the mind. Some prefer to leave Steps 1 and 2 until after fifth year exams as they will have to cover most of the material for their end-of-year exams. Yet some students prefer to sit it during or right after TI year, as they feel they have some “free” time to sit down and specifically prepare for the exam. Our advice is that you choose what is most suitable for you and your long-term goals.

NZ medical **graduates**, on the other hand, may be more pressed for time, especially when working as House Officers. Options include light studying while working, taking some time off work and/or working as a locum while preparing for the exams.

If you are thinking of training (i.e. residency) in the US or would like to do your fellowship down the track in your career, start thinking about doing the USMLE early. Otherwise, it might prove challenging to recall information like the function of the Golgi apparatus!

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References:
