

# The intensive training and assessment programme in histopathology

**A large number of experienced overseas graduates are attracted to the UK and form a significant proportion of applicants for training positions in histopathology. An individually tailored 3-month post can be used to evaluate the overseas doctor's abilities and assess his/her suitability for higher specialist training.**

Many applicants for the senior house officer (SHO) posts in histopathology described in the article by Giles et al (p. 560) have been experienced overseas graduates, typically with 4–5 years training in pathology. In 2003, the Royal College of Pathologists and Department of Health questioned whether these experienced doctors always required a full year of SHO training. An intensive training and assessment (ITA) programme was therefore established. This provides tailored training in histopathology, as practiced in the UK, and an induction to the NHS. The hypothesis was that suitable candidates could be trained to specialist registrar (SpR) entry level in 3 rather than 12 months. This article describes the development and evaluation of this programme, the potential application to other specialities and its role in new patterns of postgraduate training.

## The structure of the programme

The ITA programme was funded by the Department of Health, as an extension of the SHO histopathology schools project. It was sited at Southampton General Hospital, also home to one of the initial three SHO histopathology schools. In planning the programme, it was recognized that the doctors recruited would be experienced and in some cases would have passed the demanding first part of the examination for Membership of the Royal College of Pathologists (MRCPath). They would bring with them a wealth of experience and expertise. However, these doctors were likely to know little about working as an SHO in histopathology in the NHS, nor about patterns of disease and delivery of health care in the UK. In addition, each

trainee's previous experience and particular learning needs were likely to be different.

For these and logistical reasons numbers were kept low, and appointments of trainees were made in pairs. The ITA programme is of 3 months' duration so that eight ITA SHOs are trained and assessed each year. At month 3, the trainees undergo an aptitude assessment approved by the Royal College of Pathologists. If successful, the trainee is eligible to apply for SpR posts. The recruitment process for the ITA scheme is similar to that of the regular SHO school programme except that it takes place twice yearly. Application forms are available on the Wessex Deanery website (<http://www.wessex.org.uk/medical/jobs/index.htm>). Initially applications were submitted by post, but a large majority are now submitted electronically. Pre-interview visits to the cellular pathology department are encouraged. Interviews are conducted by two panels, using a structured format and scoring system. All candidates are interviewed by both panels. At the end of the selection day, scores for interview and application form are aggregated, and successful applicants selected.

## Teaching and learning

The major aims of the programme are:

- Understanding past, current and future trends and developments in general and specialist practice in the NHS
- Learning to work to current protocols used within UK pathology departments
- Adapting to professional standards required for practice within the NHS
- Becoming familiar with the requirements for College examinations and procedures for recruitment to higher specialist training.

It was quickly realized that each of the trainees would need an individualized programme taking into consideration their previous training and experience. The trainees rotate through the surgical pathology specialties. In particular they dissect and report major oncological specimens according to College protocols. Depending on previous experience in autopsies, they perform 10–15 autopsies under consultant guidance. They also screen and report gynaecological and non-gynaecological cytology specimens.

In addition to this clinical apprenticeship, ITA SHOs also participate in all departmental teaching activities, including:

- A 30-minute seminar on common histological specimens over a multi-headed microscope with a consultant (3 days per week)
- A 45-minute 'black box' seminar on current difficult cases in surgical pathology, held weekly
- The weekly 45-minute seminar on basic concepts in pathology for SHOs
- The weekly MRCPath course.

Each of the trainees has a mentor who advises him/her on the importance of communication skills, clinical audit, clinical governance and team management in clinical care. The mentor also guides the trainee on aspects of writing a good CV, applying for jobs and handling job interviews.

## Assessment of satisfactory progress

The Royal College of Pathologists requires that all trainees in histopathology successfully complete the aptitude assessment before being appointed to the SpR grade. For ITA trainees it is conducted over 2 days and consists of an objective structured pathology examination (OSPE), an autopsy examination and a short presentation on a pre-arranged topic.

If the assessment does not indicate satisfactory progress, the assessors have three options:

1. To advise a further short period of intensive SHO training and reassessment
2. To advise the trainee to apply for a full 12-month SHO post in an SHO school
3. To seek an alternative career pathway.

## Outcomes and evaluation

Since its inception in September 2003, 14 trainees have been through the ITA school. Of these, 13 successfully completed the 3-month programme and were subsequently appointed to SpR posts in the UK. Eight had already completed part 1 of the MRCPath exam before joining the ITA scheme. One of the trainees, who declined to take the aptitude assessment, decided to seek an alternative career pathway.

'Case study' was the evaluation approach used (Golby and Parrott, 1999). The primary purpose was to understand the ITA programme through enquiry into participants' actual educational experiences of it, and through this to enable those responsible to bring about further development of the scheme. Curriculum evaluation is central to and integrated with the development of a curriculum (Fish and Coles, 2005).

Feedback from trainees highlighted the importance of a structured programme for the induction of overseas doctors within the NHS. Trainees valued the broad overview of UK pathology practice, opportunity to perform autopsies using standard protocols, one-to-one consultant teaching, multidisciplinary team meetings

and regional pathology meetings. ITAs learned a great deal from the year one SHOs on the parallel programme, particularly regarding practical everyday details such as the computer system operating within the department and coping with the common frustrations of administrative delays. ITAs (especially those separated from their families) had to make substantial adjustments to living in the UK with its very different lifestyle. On moving to SpR appointments, most were unfamiliar with the concept and implications of 'banding'. Two who took up unbanded posts have subsequently been appointed to banded posts in other regions (Coles and Mountford, 2005).

Many of the consultants involved with the course had worked with overseas doctors on clinical attachments. Five of the seventeen consultants were non-UK graduates and others had worked abroad during their training or in the armed services. The department was positive about the ITA course, and experience of it increased these positive feelings. Other initiatives in postgraduate education were running simultaneously with the ITA programme. As these had been specifically funded by the Department of Health there was little of the feeling that the additional work required was being absorbed without taking any formal recognition of the effect of these changes on service commitments. The first author interviewed the SHOs in 'mid term' and acted as the external assessor at the 3-month aptitude assessment. As the majority of ITAs were Indian graduates it was fortuitous that he had extensive knowledge of the practice of pathology on the subcontinent, where standards vary considerably from centre to centre.

## The future: implications for the NHS

The ITA programme is innovative and has delivered significant benefits for the individual overseas doctor and for the NHS. The host department has benefited by receiving a cohort of knowledgeable doctors with very different experiences in pathology. The ability to design and deliver such a well-constructed and popular course has been good for morale and for the national profile of the department.

All specialties receive many applications for their training posts from overseas doctors. It is difficult to evaluate these doctors' experience and competence during the recruitment process. Typically, entry into a specialty is through a clinical attachment. These are essentially observerships with no real opportunity for hands-on training (Rich and Marvin, 2004). The ITA model could be adapted to other specialties, as long as they have or could develop some form of aptitude assessment.

Despite the evident success of the programme, in histopathology the future of the ITA scheme is uncertain. Imminent changes to postgraduate medical education are proposed in Modernising Medical Careers. In par-

**Dr Hoshang Bharucha** is Former Consultant Histopathologist, Department of Pathology, Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast, **Professor Colin Coles** is Professor in the School of Education, University of Southampton, Southampton,

**Dr Vipul Foria** is Consultant Histopathologist and Cytopathologist and

**Dr Patrick J Gallagher** is Reader in Pathology and Honorary Consultant Histopathologist, Department of Cellular Pathology, Southampton University Hospitals, Southampton SO16 6YD and **Dr Brenda Mountford** is Visiting Fellow, School of Education, University of Southampton, Southampton

Correspondence to: Dr V Foria

ticular, run-through training will be implemented in histopathology, with the abolition of the competitive hurdle between SHO and SpR grades. A mechanism will

### KEY POINTS

- The intensive training and assessment (ITA) scheme is a novel training concept introduced by the Department of Health for experienced overseas histopathologists.
- It provides an individualized structured training programme taking into account previous experience.
- The curriculum includes orientation to the NHS, working to current protocols used in UK histopathology, autopsy practice and mentoring.
- An assessment of satisfactory progress is undertaken at the end of the 3-month programme.
- With the introduction of Modernising Medical Careers, a mechanism is needed to integrate the ITA scheme with run-through training.
- The scheme provides a model for evaluating and training experienced career grade doctors who want to progress to a certificate of completion of training in the UK. It could be adapted for other specialities. In a modified form it could be a source of proleptic experience for fully trained overseas histopathologists intending to take up consultant positions in the UK.

potentially be needed to integrate the ITA scheme with run-through training. The experience that the authors have gained as trainers has been invaluable, and has given them a flexible approach to future changes in the training and evaluation of experienced overseas histopathologists. In the absence of a scheme such as the ITA, there is the danger that a significant number of experienced doctors would have to apply for year 1 training posts, for which they would be overqualified. **BJHM**

*The authors would like to thank all members of staff in the Department of Cellular Pathology, Southampton University Hospitals for their support. This scheme was developed in association with Dr Julia Moore in the Department of Health. The authors are grateful to Shelley Heard, Hugh Platt and Phil Quirke for their help in establishing this programme. Conflict of interest: none.*

- Coles C, Mountford B (2005) *Evaluation of the Intensive Training and Assessment Programme (ITA) in Histopathology at Southampton for experienced doctors: The Final Report*. Open University Centre for Education in Medicine (OUCEM), Milton Keynes
- Fish D, Coles C (2005) *Medical Education: Developing a Curriculum for Practice*. The Open University Press, Milton Keynes
- Golby M, Parrott J (1999) *Educational Research and Educational Practice*. Fair Way Publications, Exeter
- Rich A, Marvin C (2004) Clinical attachments - time for a change. *Br Med J Careers* **328**: 264–5