

The Medical Masterclass: a new tool for continuing professional development

John Firth

The Medical Masterclass comprises twelve paper-based modules, two CD-ROMs and a companion website. Its main aim is to help doctors in their first few years of training to improve their medical skills and knowledge, and in particular in their preparation for the MRCP examination. It will also be a valuable tool for continuing professional development.

The Membership examination of the Royal College of Physicians (MRCP) was clearly established as the qualification for a career as a hospital consultant physician in 1859. It remains so today. The examination has evolved over the years, and will continue to do so with the imminent introduction of Practical Assessment of Clinical Examination Skills (PACES). By contrast, teaching and learning for the exam have changed little over the last 50 years, relying on local courses and commercial enterprises.

The Medical Masterclass, produced by the education department of the Royal College of Physicians of London in conjunction with Blackwell Science, is a bold new venture. It comprises paper and CD modules covering the major areas of medicine, supported by a website (<http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/> and click on Medical Masterclass) that will provide updated materials, summaries of and links to the latest articles, and self-assessment questions with feedback. Its main aim is to support doctors preparing for the MRCP exam, but it will also be a valuable tool for continued learning for all those who wish to practise high quality medicine.

STRUCTURE OF THE MEDICAL MASTERCLASS

There are three parts to the Medical Masterclass: paper based, CD and web. Their range is broad, the approach is distinctive, and they are up to date.

Dr John Firth is Consultant Physician and Nephrologist, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge CB2 2QQ and Editor-in-Chief, Medical Masterclass

Paper based

Twelve modules, listed in *Table 1*, cover the scientific background to medicine (two modules), general clinical issues (one module), emergency medicine (one module) and the clinical specialties (eight modules) in a total of just over 2000 pages.

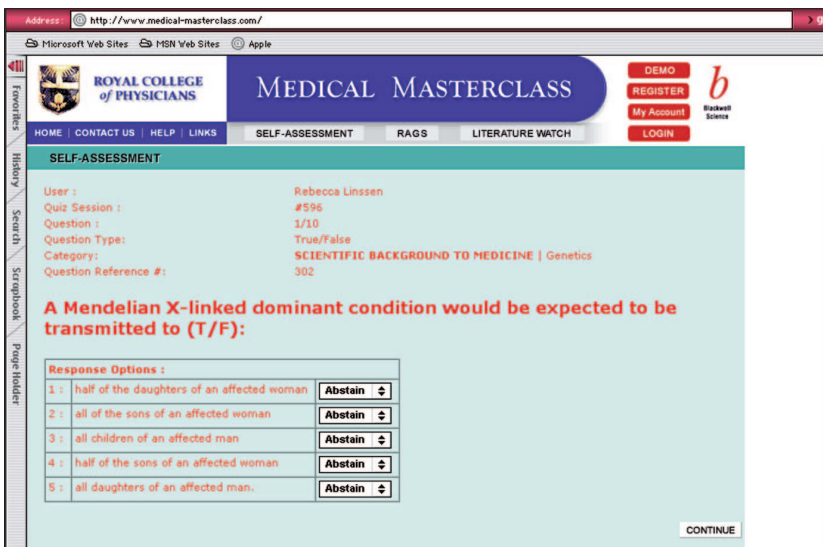
To put some flesh on these dry bones: cell biology, genetics, molecular medicine and immunology are covered in module 1 in addition to more conventional basic science subjects

such as anatomy and physiology, which are not neglected. In module 2 there is discussion of epidemiological and statistical techniques, of evidence-based medicine, and in clinical pharmacology there is description of drug development as well as of the more traditional clinical aspects.

Nearly all doctors deal with people who are old and frail, or who are dying: module 3, on general clinical issues, includes medicine for the elderly and pain relief and palliative care. It also

TABLE 1.
The twelve paper-based modules of the Medical Masterclass

Scientific background to medicine 1	Genetics and molecular medicine Biochemistry and metabolism Cell biology Immunology and immunosuppression
Scientific background to medicine 2	Anatomy Physiology Epidemiology, statistics, meta-analyses and trials Evidence-based medicine Clinical pharmacology
Clinical skills	General clinical issues Pain relief and palliative care Medicine for the elderly
Emergency medicine	
Infectious diseases and dermatology	
Haematology and oncology	
Cardiology and respiratory medicine	
Gastroenterology and hepatology	
Neurology, ophthalmology and psychiatry	
Endocrinology	
Nephrology	
Rheumatology and clinical immunology	



includes a section on 'how to take a history and to examine the patient' and 'how to communicate'. Increasing technical sophistication, which has brought many substantial benefits to patients, has meant that the emphasis tends to be on 'what test?', 'what procedure?', 'what evidence?'. A glance at the newspapers or a moment listening to the news means that it hardly needs to be argued that medicine has a communication problem, all of which begins with talking to the patient. The approach in the Medical Masterclass is specific: how do you get the most useful history out of a man who seems to have a thousand complaints? What do you say to the wife of a man who has just died in resuscitation? These issues are dis-

cussed throughout the clinical modules and not all hived off into a section headed 'communication skills' or 'ethics': these things cannot and should not be separated from the medicine.

Patients do not typically present to medical services saying 'I've got Hodgkin's disease': they feel unwell and have lumps. All clinical modules, including that dealing with emergency medicine, begin with a series of case histories that define the compass of each specialty. How do you deal with the man who has lumps? What are the key elements of the history, what are the critical points on examination, how should you investigate, and what should you say to him if the news is, or might be, bad?

The second part of each module contains structured notes on the commoner diseases, investigations and treatments encountered in each specialty, and all modules finish with self-assessment questions in a variety of formats.

The CD

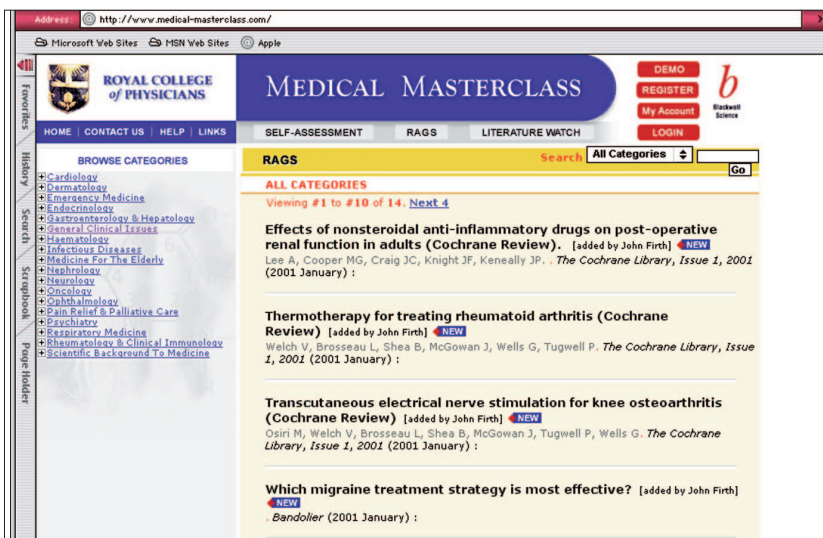
The Medical Masterclass will contain two CDs, each containing 30 interactive cases. The format gets closer to 'real life' than anything written on paper. You see the history of the case and the findings on examination, often illustrated with a video clip. You order those investigations you would like to perform. Some results come back immediately, but some don't: you have to decide from a range of management options before all the information is back, just as in clinical practice.

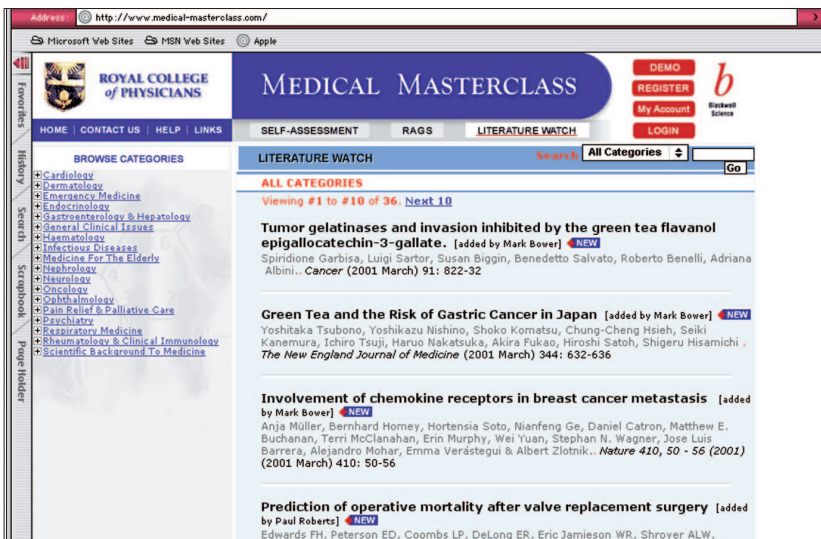
Instant feedback is forthcoming: 'your management is good, but perhaps not the best option, why didn't you do this also?', or 'the patient has deteriorated and been transferred to intensive care', although hopefully that will not happen on too many occasions. The results of all investigations then become available and you have to decide upon your final diagnosis or diagnoses and on your definitive treatment or treatments: instant feedback is again provided. Each case finishes with a brief commentary and self-assessment questions.

The website

There will be two main features on the website: self-assessment questions and summaries of the literature, also of reports, reviews, appraisals, guidelines and standards produced by key organizations. The self-assessment section will clearly be of most interest to doctors preparing for the MRCP examination; the other aspects will be of interest to all wanting to keep up-to-date.

Self-assessment questions: Users will be able to select from a large bank of questions written in four formats. They will be able to choose how many questions to do, and select the type of questions that they want to tackle: would they like a mock exam of 60 questions selected across the whole





KEY POINTS

- The Medical Masterclass is a new educational venture for doctors comprising paper-based modules, CD-ROMs and a website.
- There are twelve paper-based modules: two deal with the scientific background to medicine, one is devoted to general clinical issues, one to emergency medicine, and eight cover the range of medical specialities.
- All clinical modules begin with a series of case histories that define the compass of each speciality, which is followed by structured notes on diseases and treatments, and by self-assessment questions.
- There are also two CD-ROMs each containing 30 interactive cases, which are closer to real life than anything on paper.
- The website features self-assessment questions and bullet-point summaries of key literature, reports, reviews, appraisals, guidelines and standards.

range, or 10 questions on, for example, cardiology? Explanatory notes will be given along with the correct answers, and it is intended that users should get feedback to see how their performance compares with that of others.

Literature, reports, appraisals, guidelines and standards: The most important general medical journals and key specialty journals will be scrutinised each month by teams of authors and editors working in each specialty. They will write bullet-point summaries of those articles that are of general interest, with links to the abstract or paper available for those who wish to find out more.

Reports, reviews, appraisals, guidelines and standards are produced from a bewildering plethora of sources, and with subject matter that can vary seem-

ingly at random, e.g. consideration of a cure for flu is followed by something on wisdom teeth, hip replacement or coronary artery stenting. Important sources of such information, including the National Institute for Clinical Effectiveness, national service frameworks, Bandolier, Cochrane and the clinical effectiveness and evaluation unit of the Royal College of Physicians, will be scrutinised every month and brief summaries written, with links to the sites for further information.

What will all this look like? The website will grow and develop. However, the intention is to create a resource where someone who wants to find out the latest information on, for instance, the management of acute coronary syndromes, will click on 'Cardiology' then 'Ischaemic heart disease' then 'Acute

coronary syndromes', and be presented with summaries of recent literature and of the reports, reviews, appraisals, guidelines and standards produced by key organizations. Logging on to the Medical Masterclass website should become an excellent way of keeping abreast of developments, which are happening at pace. **HM**

Conflict of interest: Dr J Firth is editor-in-chief of Medical Masterclass.

