

How to choose finals revision courses

Carol Kan and Suresh Krishnan speak from experience

It's that time of year again when all the final years start what seems like their never ending revision for the dreaded MB BS (bachelor of medicine and surgery) finals. The good thing is that most people pass and become doctors. But how do you survive the period ahead?

One puzzle is how to choose a revision course. You are swamped by letters and emails from all sorts of organisations promoting their courses, which all sound similar on paper but are often quite different.

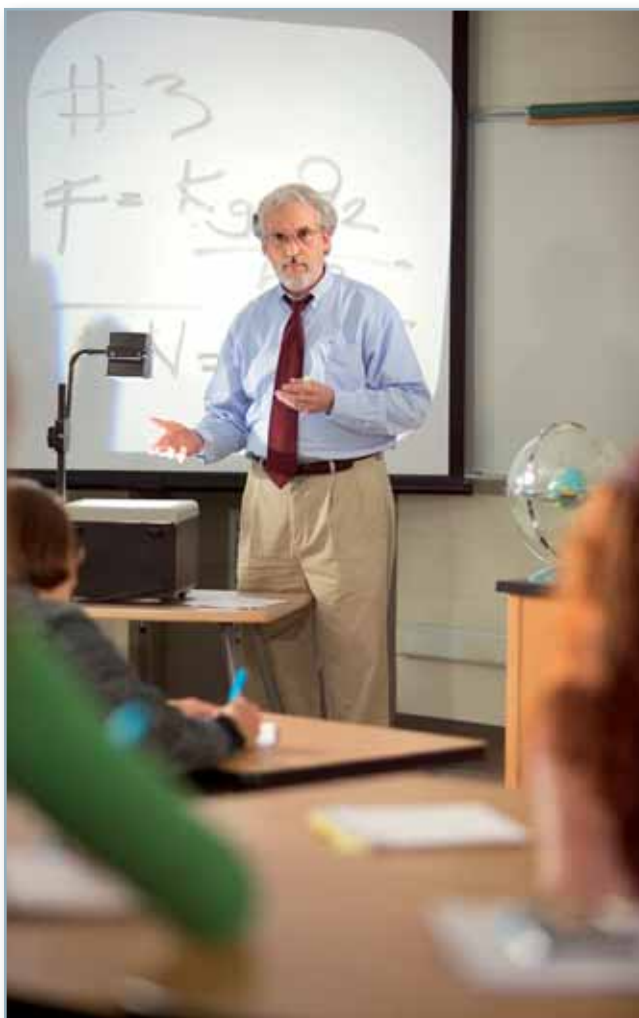
National or local

The Medical Defence Union, the Medical Protection Society, and Pastest run national courses from London to Glasgow in medicine, surgery, and other specialties, including paediatrics. They provide a comprehensive grounding in the basics, with handouts containing useful mnemonics and revision guides. The teachers are consummate professionals and, as most of them are examiners, they can highlight the common pitfalls encountered in the exams and provide tips on how to avoid them. These courses can, however, be expensive, ranging from £50 to £250 (€70 to €340; \$100 to \$500).

Local courses provided by the hospitals in your university are tailored more towards your needs because they tend to be based on your curriculum. They are also likely to take place in your local area, and so commuting is not a problem. It is important to bear this in mind because travelling can add additional stress to your already jam packed revision schedule. The quality and organisation of local courses can vary tremendously, and finding information about them can be hard. A good way to find out more is to visit your university's website, to contact relevant university societies, and to talk to friends who have just completed finals.

Theory or practical

Most revision courses teach clinical theory, with limited practical exposure. An increasing number of medical schools are using the objective structured clinical examination format for the practical aspects of examinations, and there has been a corresponding rise in local courses that cater for such an approach. Our opinion is that the practical elements of clinical medicine are better developed by organising weekly tutorials with a doctor (from senior house officers to consultants—anyone who has passed their membership exams for one of the royal colleges of physicians or surgeons), in which you examine patients and discuss appropriate clinical cases.



General tips

- Treat a revision course as a study aid rather than comprehensive preparation
- Don't attend many courses on the same subject out of fear of failing
- Use courses to guide your revision and highlight important topics
- Choose a revision course that will target your own academic weaknesses
- Ask seniors, friends, and relevant university bodies to identify appropriate revision courses
- If doing week long courses, prepare for each session—you will get more out of it
- Supplement the theory learnt on the course with history taking, examination, and clinical skills practice
- Factor time for travelling into your decision
- Don't become stressed if you find you are unfamiliar with material discussed in a course—it is as important to find out what you don't know as what you do know
- There is no substitute for getting your head down and learning the material

Your university may already have a system in place to facilitate this, or you may need to arrange it yourself—but you won't know if you don't ask. We recommend that for everyone to participate fully and gain maximum benefit the ideal scenario for revision tutorials would be groups of 3-5 students for 1-2 hours each week.

Weekend or weekly

For some courses you can attend a weekend or weekly session—that is, three hours once a week. The advantages of a weekend course are that it gives a quick review of what you do and do not know and that is easier to fit into a busy schedule. They are, however, extremely intense, and retaining information can be difficult in the eight hour marathon.

Weekly courses are excellent because they cover topics over time, which is more likely to help reinforce your understanding of the subject. You are invariably given a course schedule on the first day, and preparing for the topics beforehand will benefit. However, weekly courses are a lot more expensive than weekend courses, and making the commitment can be difficult to organise in your life. It may also interfere with your revision plan, as they tend to cover a few specific topics

each week, and this timetable of revision may be different to your own.

Flying colours

Remember that a revision course is not a golden ticket to passing finals. Most are crash courses that cover the essentials for MB BS examinations—the aim is to help you pass. They should be thought of as tools to help you with revision, but no more. Some people attend every course under the sun and still fail, and others attend none and pass with flying colours.

Everyone has their own individual learning needs and will respond best to different revision methods, be it lectures, group teaching, or individual study. You need to identify which is best for you. Your university will also organise its own courses, and they are worth asking about. Despite all these revision aids, sometimes you'll find yourself just having to sit down and learn the many causes of pleural effusion.

Carol Kan F2, North West Foundation Programme
carolkan@doctors.org.uk

Suresh Krishnan F1, South East Foundation Programme

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