

# Guide to the Primary FRCA

The FRCA primary is definitely a challenging exam, but it is doable and countless people have passed it before you (and me). One of the biggest challenges to the exam is balancing your time commitments sufficiently to cover the wide syllabus that is packed with new topics and also maintaining family life, your personal sanity and staying on top of things at work. It seems a big ask but with good organisation, thorough preparation and decent time management it can be achieved. It's worth starting early, not necessarily revising but just finding out about the exam and what will be expected of you.

Be wary of exam horror stories that pepper anaesthesia folklore ! It's definitely worth getting advice from colleagues, especially those that have recently passed. But be mindful that the exam has changed over the years and sometimes there's a tendency to exaggerate aspects of it depending on who you speak to !

Finally this is just a guide based on my experience, which is by no means the best (or only) way of doing things. Everyones experience is very different. So feel free to take it with a pinch of salt !

Good luck.

*Damhnaic McDonald, 2019*

## **Getting Started**

I found that the excitement of finally starting anaesthetics was a good motivator to doing some early reading around. I used our local weekly teaching sessions as a starting point and tried to do a bit of pre-reading before these in order to get things explained in a different way and ask questions on concepts I couldn't get my head around at home. At work I asked trainees who had recently sat the exam for resources they'd found helpful and pitfalls of revision that I should avoid. During this time I hadn't committed to an exam date but started to confront the idea.

Once reading developed into revision I looked up the exam dates (and more importantly application deadlines) and printed a copy of the primary syllabus. The syllabus is fairly intimidating but it's key to cover all aspects of it. I broke it down by subject domains and ticked off the topics that I had read about, understood well and had made some revision notes on. This really helped me to identify areas of weakness or those that were being repeatedly avoided !

I committed to proper structured revision in December to sit the MCQ in March.

## **Textbooks I Found to Be Generally Useful**

Many of these books can be found second hand on eBay. There's a dizzying selection containing mostly the same material, so it's worth picking up a few to see which you prefer. Some people in the know had textbooks in PDF format, worth asking around !

*Basic Physiology for Anaesthetists; Chamber, Huang & Matthews*

An incredible book that covers all aspects of physiology. Particularly easy to understand explanations and diagrams. The book is in question and answer format and has good clinical correlations. I used it mostly for the MCQ as it goes into the required level of detail.

*West's Respiratory Physiology: The Essentials; West*

Classic book for respiratory physiology, this was the first book I read as its short and less intimidating. Professor West has lectures on YouTube that correspond to each chapter - worth watching if something doesn't make sense first time.

### Basic Physics & Measurement in Anaesthesia; Davis & Kenny

This book is slightly older and as such takes a bit of effort to get through. I found the explanations very good and enjoyed the simple diagrams. It assumes a certain level of previous knowledge in parts though. Other prefer *Physics in Anaesthesia* by Ben Middleton et al.

### Pharmacology for Anaesthesia & Intensive Care; Peck & Hill

Highly regarded book that covers all the key principles that are examined in a good amount of detail. One of the authors used to examine at the college so it has become a bit of a bible! I read this cover to cover early on and then used it as a reference for all parts of the exam, the tables especially provide excellent summaries.

### Equipment in Anaesthesia & Critical Care; Aston, Rivers & Dharmadasa

This book is really good. It has excellent images and diagrams as well as a simply laid out explanation of equipment including pros and cons. It's very easy to read and revise from.

## **MCQ Revision**

The key to success is understanding concepts properly. This makes it easier to add on and learn the details later. For this reason I spent a large chunk of my time reading and going over notes that I had made. As the exam got closer I then spent proportionally much more of my time doing practice questions.

Exposure to MCQs is absolutely essential, not least because the questions on e-LFH and those contained within the college's blue books are often repeated or appear in very similar formats in the exam. At first it was deeply disheartening to find that the questions picked up on tiny details that I'd barely registered during my reading, but with time it becomes clearer which of these little details are important.

I managed to borrow some of the older blue books and MCQ papers that colleagues had picked up on revision courses. The college also runs its own MCQ revision courses, the question papers periodically appear on e-LFH throughout the year - so look out for these. I also went through any question book I could get my hands on in the hospital library and went through questions on the [FRCA.co.uk](http://FRCA.co.uk) website on my phone whenever time would allow.

I didn't use paid-for online question banks nor did I attend an MCQ revision course. I felt that I was getting enough practice material myself.

## **OSCE Revision**

Like most people I neglected OSCE revision in favour of the viva. I think this is because the viva is the more intimidating exam whereas OSCEs have been done before. This is a risky strategy though since there is some new material that may not have been encountered in MCQ/viva revision; such as: anatomy (!), anaesthetic emergency guidelines, patient examinations, epidural insertion, machine checks etc.

Firstly I visited the RCOA website to find out as much as I could about the format and contents for the exam. The website is very good and contains lots of resources on both the OSCE and viva, notably a very good selection of videos showing examples of the stations and different vivas. The [FRCA.co.uk](http://FRCA.co.uk) website contains lists of previous OSCE stations as does the RCOA blue books (also including mark sheet). There are a few OSCE textbooks that have further examples with explanations of common stations. I went through as many of these as I could in my own time.

Nothing can prepare you for the OSCE like doing practice, it is essential and the more the better. At work I approached registrars to set up practice stations for me and during lists I would practice machine checks, familiarise myself with equipment and go over emergency drills. I went to the Coventry OSCE/viva course; the deanery will pay for one course in preparation for the primary but it must be in area. I also managed to get onto the Walsall Hospital's local course (which was free) and also a course at Guy's Hospital in London (which cost just £15). It's worth keeping an eye out for such courses as they are mostly very affordable but sell out quick, I signed up to the London course before knowing I'd passed the MCQ. Any form of practice is useful !

*The Objective Structured Clinical Examination in Anaesthesia: Practice Papers for Teachers and Trainees; Mendonca & Balasubramnian*

There are a few of these books that contain example stations and mark schemes. I used this one, I think its worth reading through one just to get an idea of whats expected and consider some common stations.

*AAGBI QRH Handbook*

I found this really helpful for the anaesthetic simulation station as it gives a structured approach and troubleshooting suggestions for all the anaesthetic emergencies. Can be found on the AAGBI website as a PDF.

## **Viva Revision**

I used the same notes and textbooks from the MCQ with the addition of the Masterpass revision guides (see below). I found these really helpful since they give an overview of almost everything in a question and answer format that is well suited to the viva. I annotated the books and carried them around with me everywhere, using them to practice explaining things to myself. They also allow someone else to ask you questions during lists etc. Be careful though because these books do not contain every topic that could come up ! The Doctor Podcast series is worth mentioning, although in far too much detail than could ever be conveyed in a viva, they contain all the common viva topics and can be listened to in the car on long commutes etc.

I enlisted colleagues from work to commit to some regular viva practice. This included consultants who had a role in education, core trainees that had just passed and also registrars who had just done the final. Every resource you read says that you need lots and lots of practice to pass. I got a bit anxious about this since I hadn't met the suggested magic number of practice viva sessions, but in hindsight it is quality not quantity. I also found that on the day the examiners are very good at getting the information out of you, they don't just ask you a topic and give you 5 minutes to talk about it as in practice sessions. There are many closed questions - if you know it they'll generally get you to say it.

As the exam got closer and I was reaching peak performance, I would on a daily basis practice drawing every key diagram by memory and go over the topics I was struggling with most. This gave me more confidence and allow me to appear slicker in practice. It's indisputable that a part of this exam is appearing confident and unfazed whilst giving clear explanations that appear effortless. The better you know the content the easier this will become with time.

*Masterpass The Primary FRCA Structured Oral Exam Guide 1&2; Wijayasiri & McCombe*

Can't praise these books highly enough ! One contains pharmacology and physiology, and the other physics and critical incidents. They are revision texts but bundle everything together in one place. By the time I was revising for the viva it was refreshing to read things in a different format. I'd go as far to say that these are essential reading - however, as mentioned earlier they don't have every topic and don't always have the level of detail expected.