

The master's degree in urology – a personal perspective

BY EDMUND CP CHEDGY

I have recently completed a master's degree in urology, based jointly with the University of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. I began the course three months after commencing ST3 in urology. I had begun exploring the option of a master's degree during core training, and found an extremely wide range of options available in a variety of different subjects. I chose specifically a Master of Surgery (ChM) as it offered a more clinical focus than the MSc programmes.

My decision to undertake this programme specifically was driven by three distinct reasons: firstly, it provided a structured and directed framework for learning the specialty directly from specialist consultants, with ample opportunity to discuss cases; secondly, it allowed more in depth training in academic practice with an opportunity to undertake a research project; finally, this programme was conducted entirely via a virtual learning environment, which is more practical and easier to accommodate when training. The University of Edinburgh is consistently ranked highly worldwide, and the active collaboration of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh suggested the continued clinical focus I preferred. This programme is part of a larger family of online postgraduate degrees across various specialties, with

a well organised administrative set up, which is adequately supported by both organisations, and is readily available to students when needed.

The syllabus for this degree closely follows the syllabus of the FRCS (Urol), with the standard of work set somewhat higher than that required to pass the fellowship examination. It is designed to mirror what would be seen and experienced in clinical training, with a resulting synergetic relationship between the two. The programme is designed to be completed on a part-time basis over a two-year period, alongside normal clinical practice. For the duration of the programme, we gained online access to all the major urology journals, as well as the key textbooks and other online resources. A particularly valuable part of this was being supplied with the majority of the key papers required both for this programme and the FRCS (Urol). More details of the programme structure can be found at <http://www.urochm.rcsed.ac.uk/programme-structure/>.

This programme is delivered, for the most part, via online discussion boards of clinical cases, with specific boards addressing key papers. The clinical cases themselves are based either wholly or partly on real-world cases, and represent an accurate cross-section of inpatient and outpatient urological practice. There is a heavy emphasis on self-directed learning, as well as evidence-based practice, with debating the evidence forming a central part of the discussions. By virtue of this being an online programme, with a geographically widespread cohort, we also had an opportunity to consider clinical practice from various regions across the UK. Alongside the discussion boards, we were required to maintain a reflective portfolio covering areas of clinical experience as well as personal and professional development.

Assessments were drawn from the discussion boards themselves, the reflective portfolio summary, final extended matching and multiple choice

examinations as well as the research project. The research project assessment is split over three segments, beginning with a proposal, then a 'conference' type online poster and finally the thesis.

This programme requires a good deal of commitment, both in terms of time and effort, in order to excel. At times there can be multiple discussion boards running simultaneously, which in itself represents an interesting challenge. It is therefore vital to ensure that enough time is available in order to maximise the educational value of the programme. The blended approach to learning is of significant value, but my recommendation would be to consider the wider implications of undertaking this programme on close family, as well as any demanding hobbies.

I found the experience of this degree rewarding and informative, with the benefit of seeing the quality of my practice improve. Overall, I feel that this programme has led to me being a better and more thoughtful urologist, and experienced more rapid expansion in knowledge than I would have had without it. It is likely that the format of postgraduate education through online learning is here to stay, and this programme provides an excellent template for it.

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