



The American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery

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Dear Diplomates and Candidates of the American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on health care, our country and all of us as providers. Fortunately, the ABCRS was able to continue the Qualifying (Written) Examination without disruption through Pearson VUE testing centers. The ABCRS was not immune to the challenges of the pandemic when it came to our Certifying (Oral) Examination, however, having to postpone our September 2020 due to travel restrictions. While we were able to successfully deliver the oral examination virtually in April of 2021 for those postponed in 2020, we had significant technical difficulties with the virtual September 2021 administration and had to cancel that examination on the morning of the examination. To be open and transparent, we wanted to share the following information with you on how the board approached this cancellation and what we are doing to ensure our ability to successfully examine candidates moving forward.

For background purposes, once the decision regarding postponement of the Certifying Examination was made in the summer of 2020, the Board turned its focus on how we could safely and securely deliver a virtual oral exam securely while maintaining the highest of standards and integrity of the exam. We studied how other boards were approaching virtual oral exams, sought out companies in the online testing realm to potentially assist us, and participated in ABMS work groups with member boards trying to address the same issues we were facing.

After due diligence, the Board decided to engage with Internet Testing Systems (ITS) located in Baltimore, MD. We were attracted to the possibility of having one platform – meaning candidates and examiners would sign into one website for the purposes of the exam. The platform included video streaming and audio capabilities; as well as a secure place to host the exam and collect scoring. As the single platform was still in development, for the spring administration we used two platforms – Zoom for the video component and ITS to host the examination materials and scoring. While there were some difficulties using two platforms, we did successfully examine all (over 110) candidates.

We prepared for the September exam on the single ITS platform. There was significant work put into this process by the Board and its staff in collaboration with ITS. There were weekly meetings, testing of the system – including a simulation with over 110 people using the platform at once – testing the check in process, and the system had a technical check which tested a user's audio, video and bandwidth to ensure the examination could be administered. Further, all examiners for the fall examination were able to test the system as well as participate in demonstrations on the platform.



Despite this due diligence, there were significant technical difficulties in the administration of the September oral exam where we had to physically cancel the examination after the first session. These difficulties were related to the performance of the ITS platform and were not directly in our control. There was a small fraction of candidates who were able to complete the first session and we were able to score them and if they passed, they were certified. A majority of the first session candidates had an incomplete exam.

Once the exam was cancelled, the board directly contacted all affected candidates that day to assure them that we would move swiftly to give them the opportunity to complete the certification process. The board then scheduled two dates, one in October and one in November to allow candidates to complete the exam. The candidates were also given the opportunity to defer to September 2022. The Board was able to successfully administer the Oral examination on October 9th for 63 candidates. Another 32 candidates are scheduled to be examined in November.

The Board also met directly with ITS in the aftermath of the cancellation to review the several reasons for the technical failure and cancellation. We were disappointed to learn that ITS was aware of audio issues and did not tell us prior to the exam. The other main issue was the inability for participants to sign on due to firewall (system security) issues. ITS believed they had the firewall issues resolved, since it was a problem we had experienced and raised previously with them; however, the day of the exam they experienced a critical error in their software that did not solve this problem.

The Board has authorized the return of half of the fee that the candidates previously paid to the board for their examination to acknowledge the frustrations and delay they experienced. Furthermore, the Board is no longer under contract with ITS, will incur no charge from ITS for the failed September exam, and has notified other boards through the ABMS of the situation encountered with ITS. ITS did provide compensation to the board for its failure.

The Board will continue to evaluate all available options to us as we proceed in delivering our examinations including solving the challenges of delivering exams in today's virtual world.

Sincerely,



Scott R. Steele, MD
President



Glenn T. Ault, MD
Past President



Bruce G. Wolff, MD
Executive Director