

Revision guide for the FFPMRCA

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As a recent graduate of the FFPMRCA examination I am able to provide some useful tips on how best to prepare for the task. As doctors and anaesthetists we are well used to having exams on the horizon for most of our undergraduate and postgraduate lives. The FFPMRCA appears a formidable challenge for a number of reasons. Studying requires so much motivation, dedication and sacrifice (we all know!), and most often impacts on our personal rather than working life. In addition, the FRCA took so much of the above, it is hard to see how any energy could be mustered for yet another round of exams. The sentiment of Homer Simpson that "every time I learn something new, it pushes some old stuff out of my brain", has never felt truer.

Relative to our other postgraduate exams we must acquire depth and breadth of knowledge in a relatively short space of time, and possibly over a much wider field. A Google search of "pain" yields 548,000,000 results, versus 6,960,000 for anaesthesia. In addition the terrain of pain medicine is a lot harder to navigate than the (possibly) more defined area of anaesthesia. As such it is sometimes difficult to know where to start. Reading through different journals articles, books, and websites, I often found myself staring at a lot of repetition (definition of pain, mechanism of action of amitriptyline), and this often left me yearning for something that was quick to the point, and able to form a foundation of knowledge that could be built on. I found a number of resources really useful for the exam, in a wide variety of presentations and formats. I have listed the books that I used to study for the exam below, and which I used as a starting point, from which to read around the subject if there was something extra, I felt I wanted to know or clarify.

Short texts

Oxford Pain Management Library

The oxford pain management library formed the backbone to my learning and revision. Each text is short, easily readable, and has a wealth of information. There is not quite everything you need to know, but there is a lot of knowledge packed in these short books.

Acute Pain edited by Lesley Bromley and Brigitta Brandner

Cancer-related breakthrough pain edited by Andrew Davies

Chronic Pain edited by Andrew Dickman and Karen H. Simpson

Opioids in Cancer Pain edited by Karen Forbes

Opioids in Non-Cancer Pain by Cathy Stannard, Mike H. Coupe, and Tony Pickering

Pain in Older People edited by Peter Crome, Chris Main, and Frank Lally

Migraine and other Primary Headaches edited by Anne MacGregor and Rigmor Jensen

Neuropathic Pain edited by Michael Bennett

Medium size texts

Core topics in Pain medicine – Sian Jagger

I found this an excellent resource for learning the neurobiology. Each chapter is relatively succinct, and to a high level of knowledge and understanding. I recommend this book to form the basis of neurobiology knowledge.

Neuroanatomy – Crossman & Neary

From my medical school days. A short textbook, readable in a short space of time, and a good refresher on the different neural pathways,

Evidence Based Chronic Pain Medicine – Stannard

An excellent book. There are superb chapters on the challenges of research in pain medicine, and each clinical chapter has a good summary of the available evidence.

Pain refresher 2012 – Irene Tracey

No better place to go for an up to date overview of pain medicine from 2012. Again there is a wealth of knowledge hidden away here. Needs to be ordered from the USA, unless you know a friendly colleague who went to the IASP in Milan.

IASP pharmacology

This text is very heavy on detail and needs a quiet room and lots of concentration. For an extreme understanding of the medications we use, I found the chapters on paracetamol and NSAIDS particularly useful

Large reference texts

Textbook of Pain (Melzack and Wall) 5th/6th Edition

I only really started to venture into this grand master in the last 2 months before the exam. The new edition is very nicely laid out in my opinion, and much easier to navigate than previous editions. I though the psychology chapters in the 5th edition gave me the best understanding of the psychological principles of anything else I had read.

Waldmans Textbook of Pain

This textbook has a more biomedical approach. The chapters are short, and are useful to look up clinical syndromes and thier presentation. The neurobiology chapters at the beginning of the book, complement previous reading.

Clinical Pain Management Series – Hodder-Arnold Publishing

This is a four volume series of textbooks, which are nicely laid out and easily readable. I found the chronic pain textbook very good for neurobiology and clinical topics, which are very detailed and informative. The clinical chapters were probably one of the most important parts of my revision for the viva.

On-line resources

The following website - www.paincommunitycentre.org is a pain education website developed by Cardiff University. There is a number of excellent expert lectures on topics in pain medicine, and I recommend this website to everyone.

www.pain-topics.org is another excellent resource based in the USA. It has links to a number of journal articles and guidelines.

Journals and other resources

Best to look for Cochrane reviews, meta-analyses, and review articles. There are a number of NICE guidelines, clinical guidelines (e.g. CRPS, headache), and publications available from the Faculty of Pain Medicine, IASP, and BPS, which are relevant for the exam and a must read.

Conclusion

When I started studying towards the FFPMRCA exam, it felt at times like standing in the desert without a compass. By starting with the shorter textbooks and working my way up, the subject (especially the neurobiology), started to become strangely familiar. Soon it began to dawn on me, just how intriguing and fascinating pain medicine is, and how lucky we are to have chosen this sub-specialty. Those not in the know, think I've gone mad.